"All the News That Fits"

SUMMER DOUBLE ISSUE

Issue 1401/1402
July-August 2025

Rolling Stone

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW SPECIAL

FEATURING

STEPHEN A. SMITH

ERIC CHURCH

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

JAMES GUNN

CHARLAMAGNE THA GOD

JOAN BAEZ

SABRINA, SUPERSTAR

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"We're living through an American tragedy, and I believe we will come out intact."
BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

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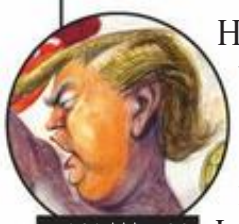

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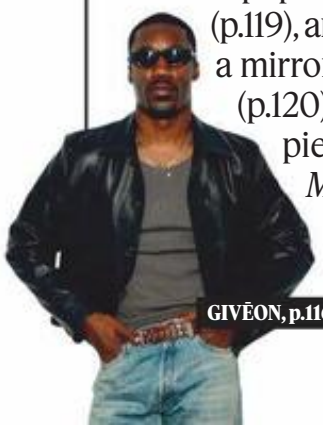

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Inside Rolling Stone

ANGIE MARTOCCIO
Senior Writer

Angie Martoccio wasn't scared to cold plunge with cover star Sabrina Carpenter. "I've done a lot of weirder shit," she says. In the past, the senior writer forged knives with actor Martin Starr and played tennis in the rain with indie rocker Faye Webster. So cold plunging "was actually comforting" by comparison, she adds. Carpenter's commitment to wellness impressed Martoccio, as did her deep-seated knowledge of music history. "She is a whiz with old discographies and careers of her heroes," she says. An RS staffer since 2018, Martoccio has also written cover stories on boygenius, Olivia Rodrigo, and Billie Eilish.

DAVID LACHAPELLE
Photographer

Before shooting this issue's cover photo, David LaChapelle had never thought to use the bathroom in his central Hollywood home studio for a photo shoot. "It felt right," LaChapelle says. He adds that Carpenter "wanted to be naked with just her hair." The cover photo and the inside images of Carpenter in an outdoor oasis were all inspired by the renowned photographer's desire to evoke a timeless nostalgia — and get out of a typical

Martoccio

studio setting. The rest of the photos were captured in LaChapelle's own backyard. "I just wanted this summer issue to breathe and to be really fresh by using nature as a background," he says. "It was so pretty bringing a more wholesome sexuality to it rather than sexy studio pictures, which can get a little plastic."

NATALIE MEADE
Journalist

Freelance contributor Natalie Meade had the chance to talk to dancehall superstar Vybz Kartel after he was released from prison last year. "It felt like a really opportune time to use dancehall as a vehicle to talk about more of the complex social issues in Jamaica," she says. As a Caribbean American editorial staffer at *The New Yorker,* Meade's work always comes back to shedding light on Caribbean stories and life. "One reason why I do this work is to show the dynamism of culture no matter where I publish," she says.

DANYEL SMITH
Journalist

When Danyel Smith interviewed Stephen A. Smith, the New York Knicks and Boston Celtics were set for Game Three of the Eastern Conference semifinals that same night. "He's a world-famous Knicks fan, and I'm an internet-famous Celtics fan," she says. "So I did get a chance to talk to him about my Celtics.... It was awesome." Her interview with the sports commentator is Smith's first piece for RS in 20 years. In the time since, she has continued to grow her career as a boundary-breaking journalist. She authored the book *Shine Bright: A Very Personal History of Black Women in Pop,* and became the host of the NAACP Image Award-nominated podcast *Black Girl Songbook*.

Smith

Vybz Kartel and Meade in Jamaica

ON THE COVER Sabrina Carpenter photographed by David LaChapelle on April 23, 2025, in Los Angeles. Produced by MAAVVEN. Executive producer: Coleen Haynes. Production manager: Desiree Lauro. Styling by Jared Ellner at A-Frame Agency. Evanie Frausto at Streeters using Redken. Hair colorist: Austin Weber. Hair piece by Showpony. Makeup by Carolina Gonzalez at A-Frame Agency. Nails by Zola Ganzorigt at the Wall Group using OPI. Production designer: Andrew Nowling. Retoucher: Glen Vergara. Stockings: Palace Costume.

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: BAUER-GRIFFIN/GC IMAGES; ROB KIM/GETTY IMAGES; BRANDON WATSON; COURTESY OF DANYEL SMITH; ILLUSTRATION BY VICTOR JUHASZ; COURTESY OF NATALIE MEADE; OLIVER CONTRERAS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; JASON MENDEZ/GETTY IMAGES

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Love Letters & Advice

The Love Club
I saw this ["Lorde: 'I'm an Intense Bitch,'" June 2025] was written by Brittany Spanos and went, "Oh, thank God, this will be good and authentic reporting."
@2nnjenn_, via the internet

Pop-Girl Whisperer
Another Brittany Spanos x pop girl banger.
@sakcore18, via the internet

"Reading now." —Addison Rae, via the internet

A Moment of Gratitude
I just wanted to give positive feedback and say thank you so much to all of your staff and editors for being firm in reporting issues on the Trump administration and the negative impacts its actions could have on all of us. It's been sad to see other media outlets give in to Trump and to refrain from critiquing him, and it has been amazing seeing your articles go into detail on what is currently happening and not being afraid to be staunchly anti-Trump. It's very much appreciated from my end. I hope you continue to keep this up for future articles.
Renzo Heredia, via email

Portland Pride
As a fourth-generation Portlander who two years ago nearly fled my hometown because I couldn't bear to watch its decline, I found your recent online piece "'It's Like a War Zone': What Happened When Portland Decriminalized Fentanyl" painfully outdated. Retro, in fact. A couple years ago I would have nodded along to every word. But Portland has changed dramatically since then, enough that I've staked a business on its revival. I co-founded Reimagine Portland with my good friend and longtime activist Randy Miller to reconnect our city's creative forces. Why? Because I witnessed a real shift happening beneath the headlines.

Your story missed this transformation completely. It got lost in addiction narratives, which, granted, is easy to do because they're visceral and heartbreaking, but unfortunately not unique to Portland. And heartbreakingly for those of us who've lived through it, the story failed to capture Portland's comeback.

The real story of Portland is one of a city that has acknowledged its problems, implemented solutions grounded in both compassion and accountability, and is now seeing results. It's about how a city can course-correct and rebuild.
Mike Thelin, via email

Lorde

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Confidential news tips: tips@rollingstone.com

SEE THE BEST NEW ROCK ACTS THIS SUMMER

Exciting things are happening in rock right now — so get your tickets for the Gather No Moss Tour, a four-stop *Rolling Stone* tour showcasing what's new. Mk.gee, the Beaches, Wet Leg, and MJ Lenderman (above) will headline our shows in Denver, Chicago, Nashville, and NYC.

RS WINS SPORTS-NEWS AWARD

The New York chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists gave *Rolling Stone* contributor David Hill the Deadline Club Award in Sports Reporting for "Sportsbook Nation," from December 2024. "This is sports journalism that takes readers beyond the game story," the club wrote.

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Reference: 1. Nutrient data for 11-fl-oz frozen mocha drink with whipped cream. FoodDataCentral. USDA website. https://fdc.nal.usda.gov. Accessed November 24, 2021.

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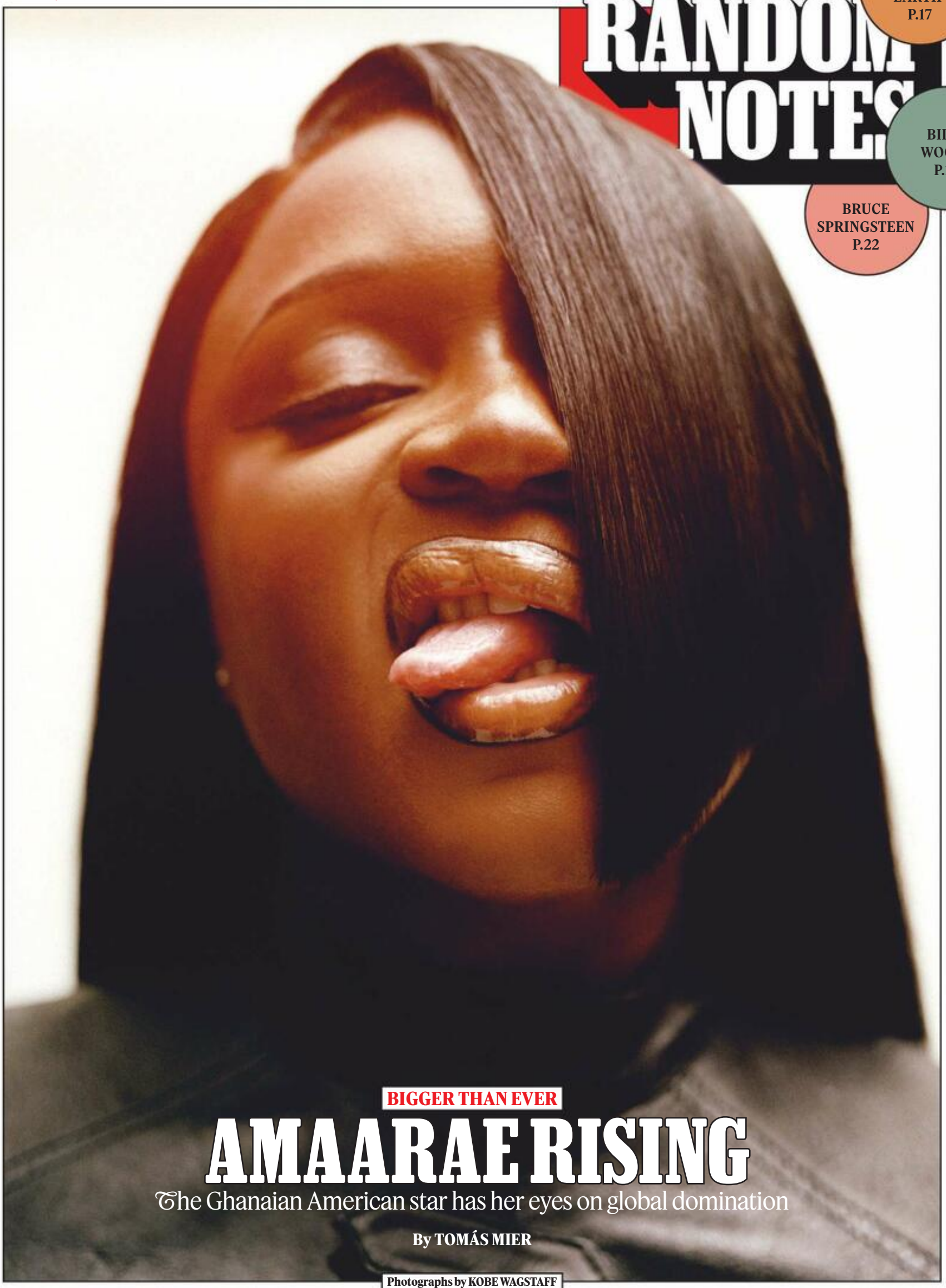


BIGGER THAN EVER

AMAARAE RISING

The Ghanaian American star has her eyes on global domination

By TOMÁS MIER

Photographs by KOBE WAGSTAFF

When you meet Amaarae, it's hard not to notice how much deeper her speaking voice is compared with the sweet falsetto she constantly deploys in her music. It's all intentional: "There's a sensitivity and a vulnerability that I get to tap into in my music that isn't very easy for me to express," she tells me under the shade of a teahouse at the Japanese Garden outside of Los Angeles. "Deep down, I'm a sensitive and mushy person."

Amaarae has been thinking a lot about who she really is. She's currently hard at work on *Black Star,* her upcoming third album, which sees her diving deeper into her identity as both a woman and an artist. The album title is a triple entendre referencing herself, the Ghanaian flag, and the Black cultural roots of the dance music she blends on the record. For the 30-year-old musician, whose real name is Ama Genfi, there's been a power to finding herself — and allowing herself to be vulnerable as an artist has given her strength. "There's a switch that flips. There's a confidence and big-dick energy to it," she says. "It's a version of me that takes over."

"With this album, I want to stamp it as 'I'm from Ghana, I love being Ghanaian.' I want to be a global symbol."

Black Star arrives two years after Amaarae released her critically acclaimed LP *Fountain Baby,* which featured the avant-garde alt-Afropop hit "Angels in Tibet," and follows a string of high-profile moments that have cemented her as an artist's artist. Over the past couple of years, she opened for Kaytranada and Sabrina Carpenter, collaborated several times across Childish Gambino's *Bando Stone & the New World,* and she made history as the first Ghanaian solo female act to perform at Coachella. "[It] was a huge turning point because before, my shows would mainly be, like, young Black kids, young African kids," she says. "There's clearly been a shift here. Now, it's much more of a global representation and melting point, which brings me a huge sense of pride."

She's seen her fan base expand, stretching out to include megastars. When she first heard she'd landed the tour slot with Carpenter, for example, Amaarae was skeptical: "I was like, 'What the hell do Sabrina Carpenter know about some motherfucking Amaarae?'" But Carpenter later told her she and her friends played her music all the time. "She's a freak just like me," Amaarae says. "It's just a different kind of expression: Hers is bright and colorful; mine is dark and edgy. But we're both saying the same thing: We're sexual beings, and we are women who feel free and confident in that."

A global symbol

That no-holds-barred sexual freedom has defined a lot of Amaarae's lyricism in the past. (A sample lyric: "I like my coffee with some head in the morning," from her song "Disguise.") Her liberated approach continues on the new album: "*Black Star* to me is the genesis of me feeling sure and confident in myself as a grown woman, number one, and knowing exactly what my message is, how I want to tell it to the world," she says.

Amaarae says she hopes her new album "resonates in a really huge way globally."

Part of her process also meant weaving threads from African sounds and the Black origins of dance music. "I'm taking my culture and I'm synthesizing it in a way that feels unique and fresh to me.... I wanted to take a genre that needs to go back home to its roots and merge that with my African roots and hip-hop and create a new world," she says.

This album, she explains, took shape as she began to feel more embraced by people in Ghana, many of whom misunderstood or had preconceived notions about her and her family. Amaarae was born in the Bronx but grew up between the United States and Ghana, with parents in high-profile roles in Ghana. Her father was a politician and banking executive, and her mother was the first female chairperson of Access Bank Ghana. She says many people assumed she was just a privileged kid making music. "They didn't think I had anything to offer because they didn't feel like I could speak from the perspective of the everyday man," she explains. She understands why people may have thought that way, but notes that she doesn't "really have much of a relationship" with her father, and that her mother "has worked her ass off for years and years to give my brother and me a good life." "I don't need to apologize for that," she explains. However, she does feel like things have shifted. "With this album, I want to stamp it as 'I'm from Ghana, I love being Ghanaian.' I want to be a global symbol," she says.

Most of all, with *Black Star,* Amaarae says she wanted to have fun. For *Fountain Baby,* the singer says she took things "too seriously" and allowed for "too many cooks in the kitchen" to decide how the album ended up sounding. This time around, the musician (and her go-to producer Kyu Steed) took the driver's seat for the project, and traveled to Brazil to meet with several baile-funk

FAST FACTS

GLOBAL GREATNESS
Amaarae was born in the Bronx and grew up between the U.S. and Ghana. She wrote her first song at 13.

DOLLARS ALL AROUND
Amaarae drew attention with "Sad Girlz Luv Money," a 2020 collaboration with the artist Moliy that led to a remix with Kali Uchis.

THE NEXT FRONTIER
After the success of her 2023 LP, *Fountain Baby*, Amaarae is going bigger and bolder with her new album, *Black Star*.

LOOK

CH-CH-CHANGES

PRIME BOWIE

Bowie, 1983

Few artists have appeared in more iconic photos than **DAVID BOWIE**, and no one took more of those images than **DENIS O'REGAN**, the chameleonic legend's official photographer. *David Bowie by Denis O'Regan,* a new book out Aug. 5, is full of 'em.

PREVIOUS AND THIS PAGE (ABOVE): STYLING BY AARON CHRISTMON AND MARQUISE MILLER. HAIR BY MAYKISHA BOWERS. MAKEUP BY NNEOMA CHISOM NWAKA. PHOTO ASSISTANCE: REID CALVERT. STYLING ASSISTANCE: DEONNA BOLDEN. OUTFIT BY BALENCIAGA. THIS PAGE (BELOW): DENIS O'REGAN/"DAVID BOWIE BY DENIS O'REGAN"/ACC ART BOOKS.

producers. She also worked with El Guincho and Bnyx, who introduced more alternative, free-flowing sounds. "They make music not for money or hits, but the expression," she says. "And that is so beautiful. I wanted to feel free like that."

Breaking through

Amaarae was ready to move past some of the harder moments that inspired *Fountain Baby*. "It's a time stamp of a very specific time that felt like hell on Earth," she says. She won't go into details about what that looked like, but explains that the music from that period "equipped me with a lot of the knowledge that I have today to navigate the world."

She approached collaboration this time with a fresh mindset, shaped in part by her experience on Childish Gambino's *Bando Stone* album, where she embodied a character that Donald Glover, she says, "pulled out" of her. "He's really good at getting an interesting performance out of you. Half the time, I didn't realize that's what he was doing, but it was masterful," she says. "Now, when I bring other people into my world, I'm more intentional. They all have to operate as characters in this world."

The new era kicks off with "S.M.O.," or "Slut Me Out," which hears her asking a lover to "scream and shout" in bed over a retro-futuristic dance energy that's ready for a Boiler Room DJ set. One of her favorite tracks? "Star Killa," where she chants "ketamine, coke, and molly" over a hypnotic rhythm. "It's bold and audacious," she says. "All the suits have gone back and forth like, 'I think you should change the name or the lyrics.' But when I preview it, people come to me and say, 'This is the record.' I think it's just nice sometimes to say the thing as it is."

The goal now with *Black Star*? "Global takeover," Amaarae says bluntly. "My soul can't rest until I feel like I've made a project that resonates in a really huge way globally. The last frontier is to make both a commercial and critical success.

"Above all," she adds, "I'm a Black fucking star."

GIMME MORE

FIVE BIG IDEAS ABOUT BRITNEY SPEARS (AND AMERICA, AND...)

Jeff Weiss' new book tackles 2000s tabloid culture from the POV of a writer who covered its biggest star

By ELISABETH GARBER-PAUL

Starting with the filming of her "...Baby One More Time" video in 1998 and ending with her entry into a conservatorship a decade later, Jeff Weiss' *Waiting for Britney Spears* is a semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional, almost 400-page look into America's most famous pop star at the dawn of the 21st century, as told through the eyes of a young, hungry, ethically conflicted tabloid journalist. Weiss, 43, had been planning to write about his postcollege stint as a tabloid writer for 20 years, but still did intensive research, using his old clips, journals, emails, and hundreds of vintage tabloids gathered on eBay to build his vivid, Von Dutch-laden world. Here are five key observations from *Waiting for Britney Spears*.

Weiss

1. Britney's shaved head meant more than we knew.
Weiss brings the 2007 scene to life with absolute clarity, and pulls back the lens — this wasn't just a woman at her breaking point, but a person being pushed to extremes. "Paparazzi capture this flip-book of despondence," he writes. "Tourettically shouting, 'Take it off, take it all off!'" It's a low moment for Spears, Weiss contends, and for society too. He compares the shift to something out of *Twin Peaks*: "This dark, Black Lodge world that we were entering, and to some degree, we've never really escaped."

2. Don't carry MapQuest printouts on a secret celeb-spotting mission.
In the book, Weiss describes being sent to stake out Brad Pitt's Malibu house in 2005 to confirm the star's relationship with Angelina Jolie. After security spots Weiss lurking in the area, he claims to just be bird-watching — but he's turned over to the cops, and hard-copy directions blow his cover. "That was the worst day of my entire life," he says, noting that chapter of the book is "100 percent" real. "I thought it was all over, and I thought I was the worst person on the planet, but I also thought *People* magazine was terrible for setting me up. And I thought Brad Pitt's security was kind of not fair."

3. Bob Saget wasn't one to mess with.
Weiss spent a fair amount of time at celebrity junkets, and recounts one in the book at which the *Full House* star asked Weiss to pass along a message to his editors, in response to their coverage of Mary-Kate Olsen: "Tell them that Bob Saget says that they can go fuck themselves with a rusty pink dildo." Though Weiss was taken aback (he hadn't even written those stories!), he immediately felt ashamed for his complicity. "I'm at, like, a charity for sick children, and Bob Saget is just reading me the fucking riot act," he says. "And I'm like, 'Oh, my God, Jeff, *how*?'"

Spears in 2003, at the peak of her tabloid coverage

4. Kevin Federline wasn't so bad.
Spears' second husband was maligned in the press during their two-year marriage. But Weiss presents Federline as a flawed human — an aging dancer and young father overwhelmed by his proximity to Spears' fame. "I found going back, he was kind of a sympathetic figure now," Weiss says. "Whereas at the time, I was like, 'This bozo, how dare he date Britney! It should be me!'"

5. Peak tabloid set us up for peak social media.
"We've cannibalized ourselves," a character based on the real-life paparazzo Mel Bouzad says toward the end of the narrative. "Eventually, it'll just be random nobodies taking pictures of celebs on the street, or the stars will just stage fake scenarios to post on their own. Cut the middleman right out." This, of course, is exactly what happened. The middleman has been cut out; we are now each the tabloid writers, as well as the tabloid fodder. Privacy is a memory, and our lives are an act. "For 15, 20 years, those words rang in my head," Weiss says.

FROM TOP: MEL BOUZAD/GETTY IMAGES; KRISTA SCHLUETER

FAK CHECK

THE WILD RIDE AND LONG ROAD HOME OF MATTY MATHESON

The *Bear* actor lived nine lives on his way to stardom, from small-town kid to chef to addict to family man

By STEPHEN RODRICK

Matty Matheson is driving down memory lane in a green 1963 Ford Galaxie. The skies above Fort Erie, Ontario, are gray, obscuring the Buffalo skyline across the lake. He points out some of the town's landmarks.

"That's where I was served my first beer," says Matheson, clad in a flannel shirt, trucker cap, and slip-on shoes. The clothes semi-cover his comprehensively tatted body, which recently found room for the names of his kids: MacArthur, Rizzo, and Ozzy.

The chef and restaurateur turned *The Bear* producer and actor grew up here, but now lives with his wife and kids in neighboring Ridgeway. It's a key distinction. We pull into a parking space in a desolate part of town, not far from the factory where Matheson's mom worked debriding airplane wings.

"I missed weddings, birthdays, every single Mother's Day. Because I wanted to be a chef."

"The kids from Ridgeway came here on the weekends," he says. "My brother and I would fight with them." He cracks a grin, remembering days of drugs, booze, and getting pepper-sprayed by the cops. "We weren't bullies; we were just scrappy."

Matheson speaks in a quiet, thoughtful way. It is the vox opposite of the frenetic Neil Fak, the happily incompetent handyman who provides comic relief amid the angst on *The Bear* (Season Four is streaming now).

Matheson bought the Galaxie last year. He loves it despite some manic-pixie car quirks, a.k.a. windows that won't open, possessed blinkers, and audio provided by an iPhone and portable JBL speaker. "I think it's bitching," says Matheson. "It's a classic."

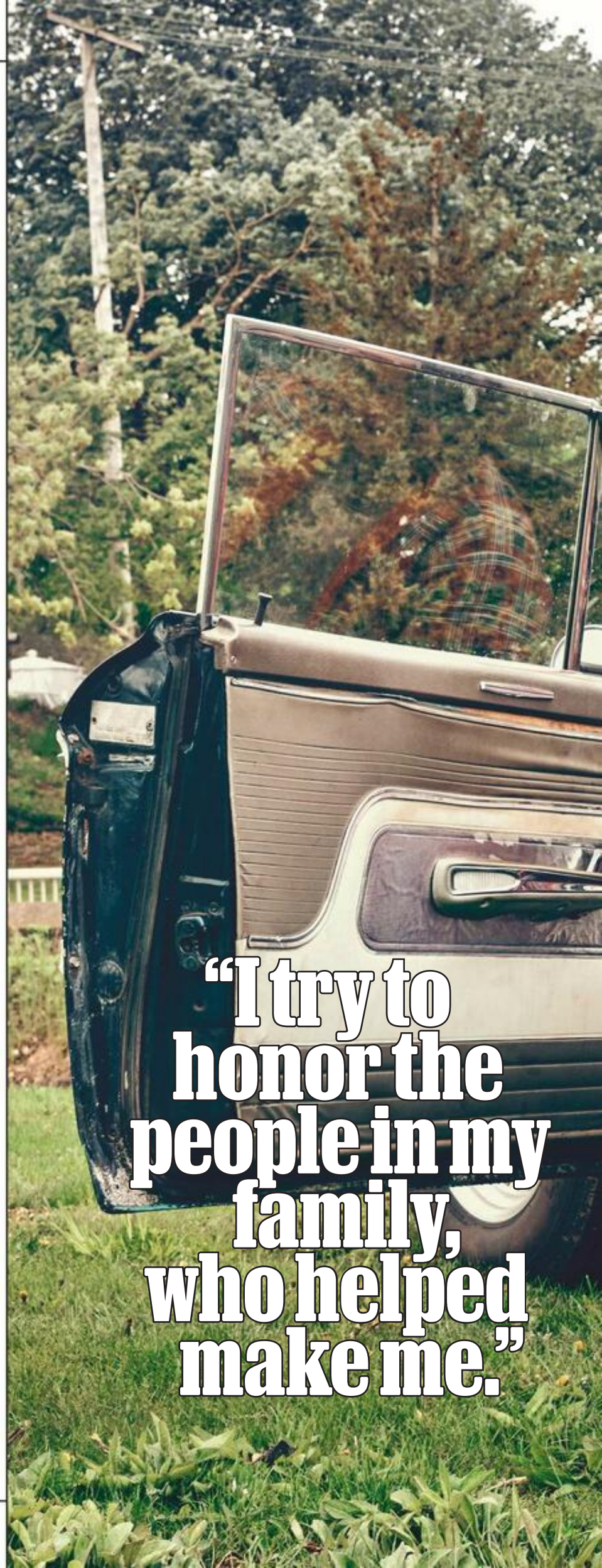
You could say Matheson has returned to the classics after years on a gravel-road joyride that nearly ended him. More on that later. Now, Matheson is reminiscing on his childhood on Prince Edward Island, where his Grampy Matheson ran a roadside diner called the Blue Goose. "He made fresh dinner rolls every day, and all his chowders and bisques," says Matheson. He smiles. "And I loved it."

From the ICU to Hollywood

Matheson moved to nearby Toronto at 19, chasing the Grampy lifestyle. He went to culinary school, played in punk bands, and consumed massive quantities of brown liquor and unlicensed pharmaceuticals. It all worked until it didn't, and Matheson suffered a heart attack at 29. Bottom was hit two years later, in 2013, when he accepted a bag of coke from his dealer in front of customers at a restaurant where he served as executive chef. Thankfully, his wife, Trish, Matheson's high-school sweetheart, stood by him, and his few remaining restaurant friends staged an intervention not long after. Matheson has now been clean for almost 12 years.

A decade-plus after landing in the ICU, Matheson was in a tux and holding an Emmy as *The Bear,* about a star chef who returns →

Photographs by BRANDON WATSON



← home to run his family's sandwich shop, won Outstanding Comedy Series; Matheson gave the speech. The show was created by Christopher Storer, whose sister Courtney is a chef. She knew Matheson from the restaurant circuit and asked him to consult. But soon after he arrived, the team got the idea to cast him. Matheson had one condition: "I didn't want to play a chef. Everyone agreed that playing a guy who doesn't know how to use a screwdriver would be funny, since I don't know how to use a screwdriver."

MATHESON ONSCREEN

BURGER WARS
Matheson won a cheeseburger contest on this Canadian competition show.

HANGOVER CURES
A YouTube show where a pre-sober Matheson would get trashed with friends and then make a meal to fit the title bill.

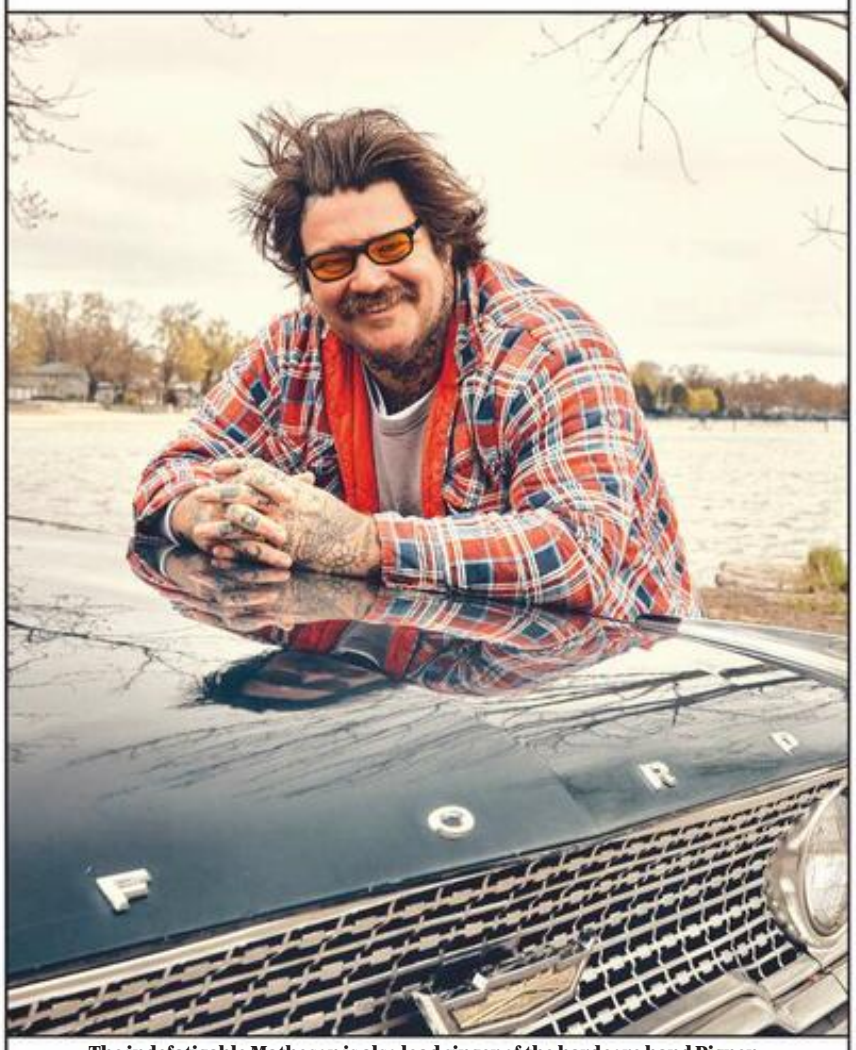
DEAD SET ON LIFE
Matheson created this Vice show, which features him traveling the world in various Matty-out-of-water scenarios.

We pull into Rizzo's House of Parm, one of six restaurants Matheson owns. He's replaced the adrenaline-pursuing death trap of getting high with more positive endeavors that also include bestselling cookbooks and a clothing line for larger men. While the restaurant in *The Bear* is driven by dysfunction, that's not Rizzo's. There's a noticeable lack of tension as the staff preps for dinner. "My kids love it here," he says. "Rizzo likes to get dressed as a princess when we come."

The path from culinary bad boy to family man has not come without a cost. "I cooked every day for 15 years," Matheson says. "I missed weddings, birthdays, every single Mother's Day. I asked my chef to take time off to go to my grandfather's funeral. He said, 'If you go, you're done.' I called my parents like, 'I need this job. I don't have a financial security blanket.' And I missed his fucking funeral because I wanted to be a chef."

Now, whenever Matheson is on Prince Edward Island he visits Grampy's grave. The farm behind his Ridgeway house is called Blue Goose Farms, and Bar Clams, a Matheson restaurant in Toronto, has seafood dishes based on his grandfather's recipes. "I try to honor the people in my family, who helped make me," he says.

A few minutes later, Matheson has to go. He's leaving Rizzo's to go see the actual Rizzo sing a *Wicked* medley with her glee club. "I can't miss that," says Matheson. Grampy lives. ®



The indefatigable Matheson is also lead singer of the hardcore band Pigpen .

ARTIST YOU NEED TO KNOW

HAUTE AND FREDDY GET THE POP CARNIVAL STARTED

They used to write for Britney Spears and Katy Perry. Now, they're having fun blurring centuries and breaking rules

By TOMÁS MIER

If you had been one of the two other shoppers browsing the trinkets at the empty Sherman Oaks Antique Mall in California in early April, you probably would have seen a couple who looked like they'd time-traveled from the Renaissance. They were staring at a two-headed, taxidermied rodent with a cowboy hat.

"How do you ethically source a two-headed rat?" asks Lance Shipp, reading a disclaimer above the dressed-up dead animals. "They can't be real, right?"

"I don't know how to feel about this," says his partner, Michelle Buzz, looking at a two-headed rabbit wearing a ruffled clown collar just like the one she has on right now. (Buzz is also wearing powder-blue tights and bloomers. She's hard to miss.)

"It's the 18th century, but we're allowed to wear shoulder pads," Buzz jokes. "It's fine!" adds Shipp.

Despite our pit stop at this booth, we're not here looking for dead-animal decorations. Buzz and Shipp, who make music as Haute and Freddy, are on the lookout for a nice parasol for Buzz, and they wouldn't mind finding a fun prop or an accessory for their shows.

Since their song "Scantily Clad" came out last year, the duo have built a solid group of fans, who have been drawn to Haute and Freddy's baroque, 18th-century-inspired fashion and Eighties-synth sound. But even if they're just at the start of this project, it's been a whirlwind getting to this point.

'That special feeling'

Buzz and Shipp share similar stories of moving to Los Angeles to pursue songwriting. For years, Shipp co-wrote and produced songs for Rauw Alejandro, Britney Spears, and Calvin Harris, among others, as part of a composer collective. Buzz, for her part, worked on hits including Katy Perry's "Never Really Over," Kylie Minogue's title track "Magic," and cuts for Bebe Rexha's past two albums.

"Truly being at the end of your rope emotionally opens up some crazy doors," says Buzz, who grew up near Houston. "When I got out here, I was writing songs with five other people in a room and lost that special feeling that you can only get from being in more of a play mindset, instead of 'Oh, I got to write a hit.'"

After meeting through mutual friends, Buzz and Shipp connected over their love for theatrical music, *The Phantom of the Opera,* and avant-garde choral pieces.

"When we finally played each other music, we were like, 'We basically have the same brain,'" says Shipp, who remembers listening to the Carpenters and Luther Vandross as a kid in Detroit.

As the pair started hanging out on weekends and after writing sessions, Shipp emerged as the quieter percussionist and instrumentalist, while Buzz took the reins as the vocalist. But for nearly two years, the pair kept their music to themselves. "I was very →

“We’re just fine to upset the prim and proper.”

Photographs by ERICA HERNÁNDEZ

← much at a low point, wondering, 'Is music still for me?'" Buzz adds. "We've been these kooky people pretending to be like, 'Hello. I am normal,' and it's not true and it's not working."

Together, they started to develop songs with alt-Eighties synths, freaky toplines, and free-flowing lyrics; soon, they added wigs, playful clothing, and role-playing. Buzz, who tells stories about leading her neighbors in playground productions of *Cats* as a kid, says she was inspired by an image she found of an old-timey circus: "That's us," she remembers thinking.

"We are going to offend the pearl clutchers, but all we're doing is being ourselves."

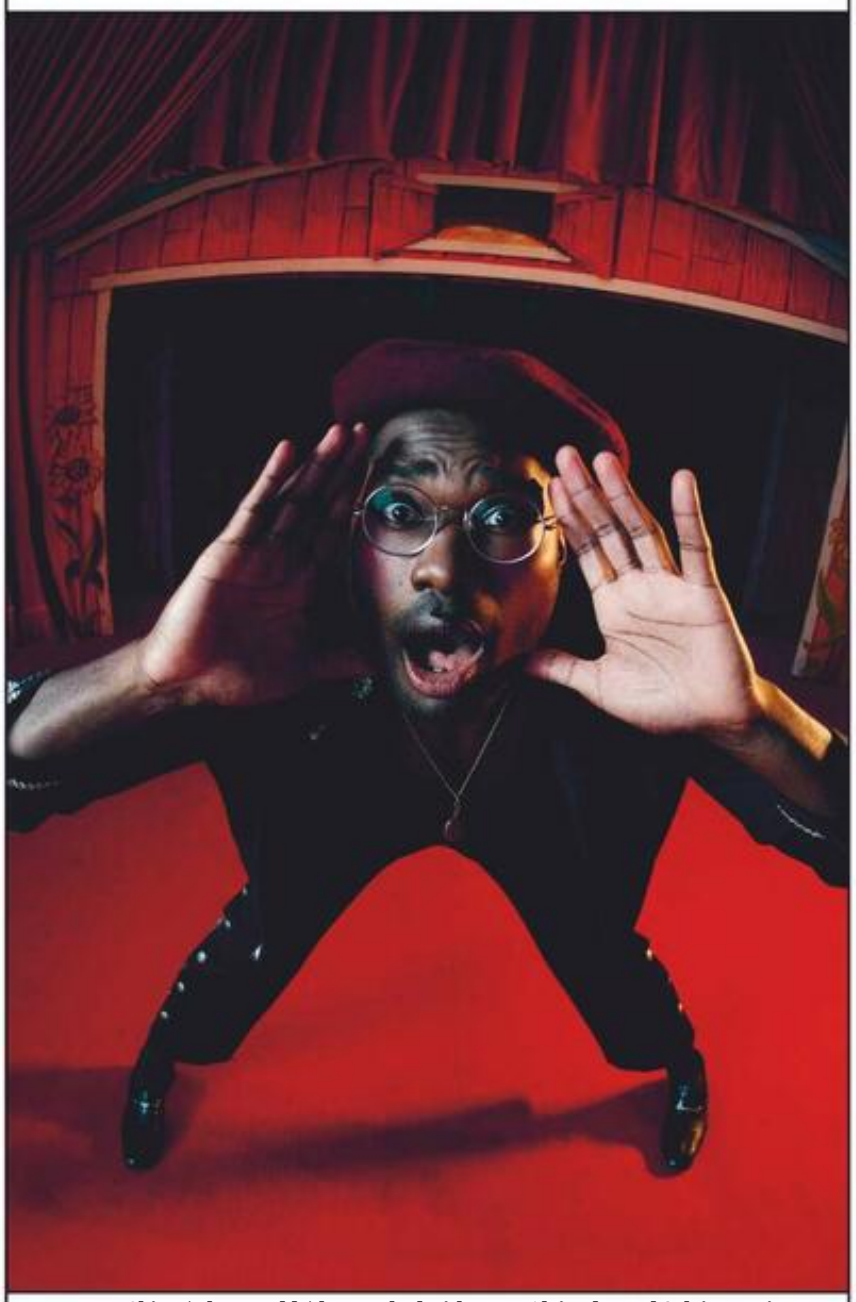
Sparked by that photo, they developed personas and a storyline: Haute and Freddy grew up in a carnival "long, long ago, far, far away," but failed to fit in because they couldn't do circus tricks. So they secretly formed a band and ran away, pissing off aristocrats in the process.

"It's the 18th century, but we're allowed to wear shoulder pads," jokes Buzz. "We blur the centuries. It's fine!" adds Shipp, who's learning to play the lute to live the full fantasy. The duo's debut single opens with Buzz's operatic voice declaring: "The queen passed out in her balcony when I came out/The king ordered his men to close their eyes and say a prayer out loud."

"We're just fine to rain on their parade and upset the queen, upset the prim and proper, and just be these fabulous misfits," Buzz says. "We are going to offend the pearl clutchers, but all we're doing is being ourselves. If you have a problem, goodbye!"

On Instagram, they write in Ren Faire English: "Dost thou have a favorite lyric to our lady on the run Shy Girl?" the band wrote under a recent post introducing a new single. During a Valentine's Day show at El Cid in Los Angeles, a voiceover introduction presented Haute and Freddy as the crowd's "humble jesters"; later, in an interlude, a pair of vintage-style clowns appeared onstage. (Hayley Kiyoko was among the fans in the audience.)

What's clear is that the duo just want to have fun. They're making music freely, experimenting with their style, and building a community of queer people and misfits around them. "It's just the deep hunger to be understood and to express myself," Buzz says. "I think everyone needs that."



Lance Shipp (a.k.a. Freddy) has worked with Rauw Alejandro and Calvin Harris.

HAIL TO THE CHIEFS

THE BEST NEW CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENT? 4 COLLEGE KIDS

Soon-to-be graduates are banding together to beat Trump as he runs for a third term. Here's their platform

By AVERY G.D. PRATT, CHARLOTTE Y. LEVY, HAMZA T. MASOUD, and STERLING E. HOYTE

As college students on the cusp of graduation, we face an uncertain future. Gazing into the abyss of postgraduate life, we can't help but ask: What's the fastest track to success? Med school plus residency would take eight years. Becoming a CEO, nine. Even the failed-actor-to-barista pipeline is six years. But there's one job that's available to every American. A job that you can get in one day, with no interview: the presidency.

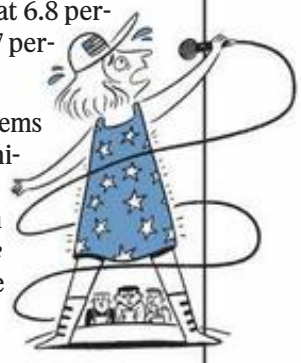
We know that the president technically needs to be 35 years of age. But to that we say: What does 22 plus 22 plus 22 plus 22 equal? Surely it's over 35. Historically, the president has never been four separate people. But think about how much the president has to do on a daily basis: Shaking hands. Kissing babies. Shaking babies. Just one-fourth of the job is a lot of responsibility.

Congress has allocated only $400,000 for the presidential salary, but $100,000 isn't bad for your first job out of college. Plus, the gig comes with housing, and we hear the place is prefurnished.

But this job isn't just a great fit for us. It's a great fit for you, too, America. Here's why:

● **TARIFFS:** We're going to tariff the tariffs. If every 25 percent tariff has a 25 percent tariff on it, then by the properties of math, those tariffs become only 6.25 percent. Here's a brain teaser to help you understand our goals: If one tariff is coming at you at 6.8 percent and another tariff is heading toward you at 5.47 percent, at what point will Ted Cruz die?

● **IMMIGRATION:** Amid mass deportations, Trump seems to have forgotten that America is a country of immigrants. We intend to remind him of this fact by deporting everybody. Then, we'll host a singing competition to determine who's allowed back in. Inspired by *The Voice,* it will be called *The Visa,* and by the end, the only Americans left will be those with angelic voices.



Illustrations by JAMES YATES

● **MANIFEST DESTINY:** Though Trump is onto something with this whole annexing-Greenland business, he's not thinking big enough. We're going to annex Greenland, Iceland, Finland, Thailand, New Zealand, and Disneyland. Once every other country is annexed, it will be impossible for anyone to be considered an immigrant, because they will all be U.S. citizens.

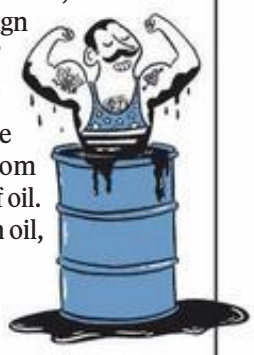
● **COVID:** It feels like no one's talking about the disease that gave us a chill excuse to hang out with our moms. When elected, we're going to bring Covid back in a big way. The stimulus checks from Covid-27, Covid-28: A New Hope, Covid-29: Omicron Strikes Back, and Covid-30: Return of the Booster will revamp our economy.

● **DOGE:** Headed by white grinch Elon Musk, the Department of Government Efficiency has been spiraling out of control. Under our administration, we will demand that DOGE establish several DEI subcommittees and hire a 500-person HR team. The department will subsequently be forced to cut its own funding.

● **HEALTH CARE:** We will not be doing this.

● **POPULATION GROWTH:** Trump wants to offer women $5,000 to have a child. We will keep that policy, but add a policy by which women will receive $5,001 for every abortion received. This is what economists call an "infinite money glitch."

● **CULTURE:** To ring in the next Golden Era of Hollywood, we will place a tariff on any animated films depicting foreign soil. *Ratatouille*? No, thanks. *Cars*? All good. *Moana*? We'll get back to you on that one.



● **GIFTS FROM FOREIGN COUNTRIES:** Unlike the sitting president, we would never accept a jet from Qatar. We would, however, accept oil. Lots and lots of oil. Our ultimate goal is to be able to drench ourselves in oil, and then wash ourselves off using more oil.

With these nine points, we intend to make not just the country proud, but our parents, too. No more texts asking for laundry money — just campaign contributions. But we need your support. So this weekend, turn off your TVs and leave your babies home alone. Come vote for us. Thank you. ®

The authors are contributors to "The Harvard Lampoon."

SPACE COWBOY

THE EXACTING ART OF NOAH HAWLEY

One of TV's most distinctive and surprising creators tackles a classic film series with Hulu's *Alien: Earth*

By ALAN SEPINWALL

When a director arrives at a filming location, they have a lot of important tasks before the real work can begin. Department heads to consult. Actors to prep. Schedules to lock. When Noah Hawley got to Bangkok to direct the first episode of *Alien: Earth,* he also had to have suits made. "One of the first things I did upon landing was go to a tailor and work up,

PATRICK BROWN/FX

Chandler stars as Wendy in *Alien: Earth*.

not a full wardrobe, but a way, through linen and cotton, to try to manage the heat, in a way that was the most stylish and comfortable," explains Hawley, the always nattily dressed Emmy-winning creator of *Fargo* and *Legion*.

The bespoke wardrobe serves two purposes. One is, Hawley, 58, believes in dressing for the part when that part involves leadership. "We can get in trouble as artists who are also managers when we don't understand the power of symbols," he says. "The boss looks like the boss. No good comes from 'I'm just like you.'"

The other purpose speaks more to the artist side. "He's got an aesthetic point of view on the world," says Hart Hanson, who gave Hawley his first regular TV job, writing for the Fox crime drama *Bones*. "That's the director part of him."

Hawley, fittingly, describes his work as "artisanal on some level. Not to be obnoxious about it, but it is. You do have to do it by hand, and every element of it has to be managed." That approach has given him a paradoxical niche as a storyteller who specializes in adapting other people's material — often from big franchises, or properties that would seem to defy adaptation — in ways that feel surprising and somehow original.

First, there was *Fargo,* which for five seasons has managed to feel true to the spirit of the dark, comic crime masterpiece by the Coen brothers — among the most idiosyncratic of modern filmmakers — without playing as a shameless copy. Then there was *Legion,* an X-Men spinoff about the mentally ill son of Professor X, which is perhaps the strangest non-David Lynch drama ever put on TV. Now, he's running *Alien: Earth* (Aug. 12 on Hulu), which is part of a more flexible franchise that in the past has been brought to life by distinct directors including Ridley Scott, James Cameron, and David Fincher.

It's a strange role Hawley has carved for himself, especially since his career began in books, where he has mostly written non-genre fiction. "I pride myself on originality," he says in the Austin office of his production company, 26 Keys, leaning on a pillow embroidered with the names of *Fargo* Season Five characters. "So it's a fascinating thing to have this niche reinventing classic films. But so far, I've been allowed to do it, as a real act of reinvention."

Trapped between past and future

Throughout the run of *Fargo,* Hawley has pitched ideas that would seem to have no business in a crime show, like repeated UFO appearances in the second season. Somehow, in context, they make sense. When Billy Bob Thornton's hit-man character attacks a mob outfit in the first season, the massacre is shot from outside of →

← the building, with only fleeting glimpses of the violence; Hawley felt it was the best way to avoid things becoming either too silly or too gory for the series' delicate tone.

"The single most difficult thing about working with Noah is he's got so much going on in his head, and you want to bring it all out," says Bob DeLaurentis, a TV veteran who has worked with Hawley on multiple series, including *The Unusuals, Fargo,* and *Alien: Earth*. "He thinks in unexpected ways."

Hawley on set with Essie Davis

With *Alien: Earth,* Hawley is making a TV show on the scale of a feature. He considers the first two *Alien* films among the best science-fiction movies ever made, with *Alien* also doubling as the best horror movie and *Aliens* as the best action movie. "My goal," he says, "was always to try to give the audience a return to the feeling that they had when they watched those two movies. How do I re-create that feeling without repeating what they did?"

To that end, he went down two intertwined paths for a story set at roughly the same time as *Alien*. His favorite part of that film was the reveal that Ian Holm's Ash was secretly an android. He leaned into that with a story about a tech mogul devising a way to put human minds into synthetic bodies, starting with a group of seriously ill children — led by Sydney Chandler's Wendy — who are given artificial, indestructible, potentially immortal new forms. And because Hawley fears the audience has become too used to the classic *Alien* xenomorph, he added a variety of new extraterrestrial monsters that have been brought to Earth by another crew working for supercorporation Weyland-Yutani.

"The story is not just this evolutionary monster, who's reminding us that we're food," he says, "but it's also the AI future that's trying to kill us. So we're trapped between the past and the future, and there's nowhere to go."

The idea of children in adult bodies was one that many of Hawley's colleagues needed a while to adjust to, but, he says, "after 20 years of doing this, I get excited at the risk. The idea that it could go horribly? That is an exciting idea for me — not necessarily for everybody." ℟

YOU NEED TO CALM DOWN

"TO SAY THIS IS MY GREATEST DREAM COME TRUE IS ACTUALLY BEING PRETTY RESERVED ABOUT IT."

Taylor Swift

KARMA IS A GOD after all. In a May 30 letter to fans, Taylor Swift announced that she'd regained control of her full music catalog after a yearslong public battle with former owner Scooter Braun.

SCARY TIMES

BILLY WOODS' HIP-HOP HOUSE OF HORRORS

The underground-rap hero tells us that his latest album is full of nightmares both real and imaginary

By ANDRE GEE

Billy Woods didn't intend to make his latest solo album. Over zlauded MC tells me that he initially planned to work on something new with Elucid, his partner in the duo Armand Hammer. But scheduling conflicts guided him toward something different from that, or from past projects like 2023's *Maps* (his concept album with producer Kenny Segal) and 2022's *Aethiopes* (produced entirely by Preservation). The result was *Golliwog* — the latest chapter in an ever-growing catalog that's made Woods a darling of underground-rap-heads.

"I knew it was my first multiple-producer product in a long time," he says. "I knew that I had more connections than ever before. So, I tried to cast a wide net."

"Hallway was barely lit, air thick with dread/It's a room full of record execs on the other end...."

Woods utilized his expanded network to procure beats from El-P, the Alchemist, Steel Tipped Dove, Conductor Williams, and others, prioritizing dark, searing sounds that gave off the vibe of a horror-movie score, and being sure not to rush the process. "It was up to me how fast I was going to move," he says.

He's always been fascinated by horror stories, citing Mariana Enríquez's *Things We Lost in the Fire* and the Stephen King movie *Cat's Eye*. In the latter, King uses a cat that finds itself in every story to thread together his tales. In his new work, Woods casts the racist caricature known as a Golliwog as the connecting link between songs, reexploring a story he wrote as a child about an evil doll.

Fantastic visions

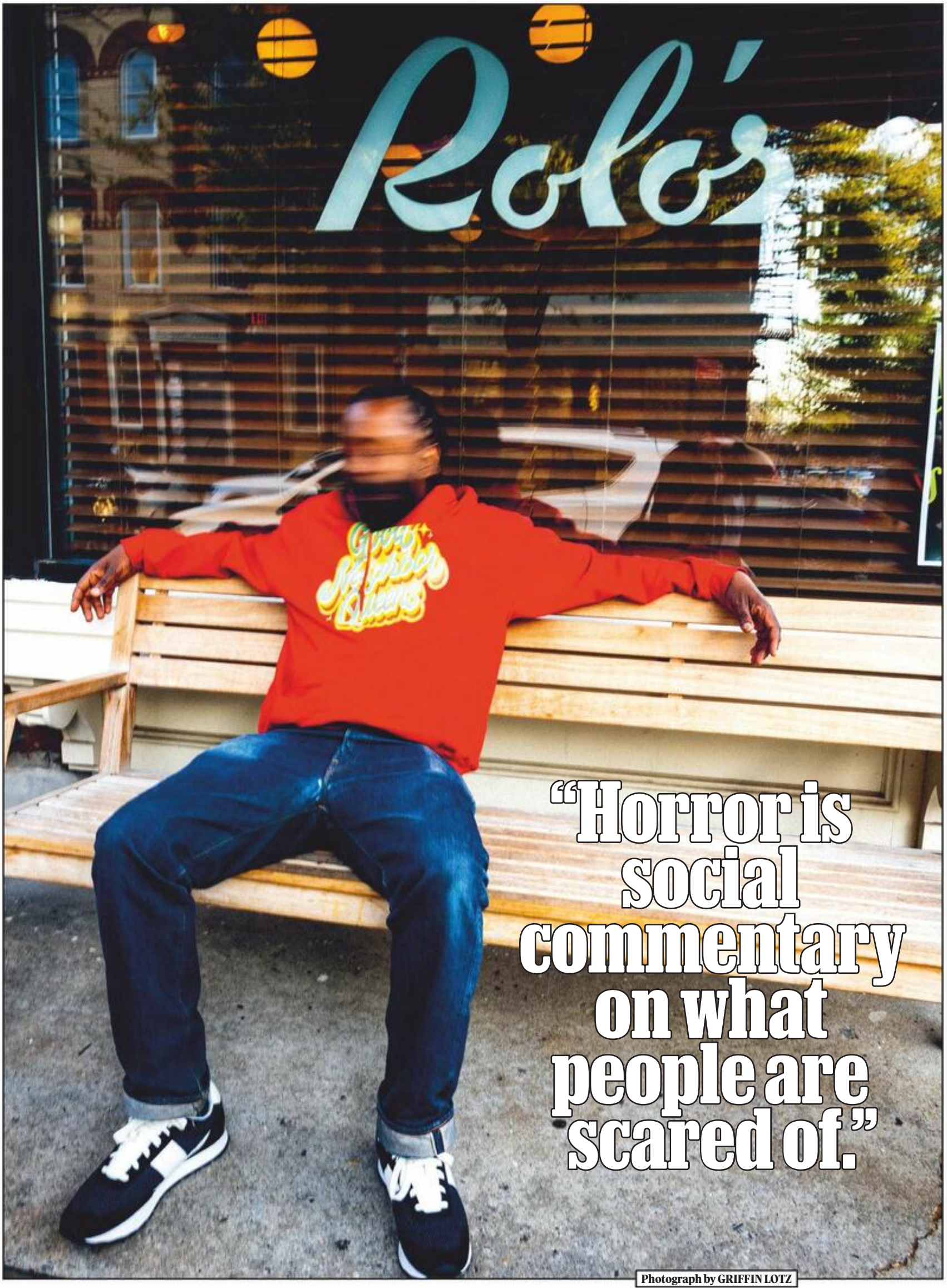
Each song on the album unfurls a unique terror. "Misery," the first single, depicts a toxic infatuation with a married woman, which takes a vampiric swerve at the end: "Ragged holes in my throat, but I love to see those lips shiny with blood," Woods raps. "BLK ZMBY" sounds like a pessimistic depiction of African people, from slave ships to a tool of capitalism. On "Cold Sweat," he plunges us into a nightmare where the "hallway was barely lit, air thick with dread/It's a room full of record execs on the other end and you dancin' on the desk."

Horror can take many forms: Some people find vampires terrifying, while others have more trepidation about young Black artists dancing for boardrooms of white record executives. Songs like "All These Worlds Are Yours" utilize pitched-down voices for ghoulish effect, but laid-bare bars like "Today I watched a man die in a hole from the comfort of my home" jar listeners with Woods' intentionally flat delivery.

Woods says moments like that demonstrate his direct approach to songwriting, which belies the popular conception that he's an "abstract" lyricist. "It's just funny that that will be a thing that people hang their hats on," he says. "Because some of the stuff is very straightforward. And I also do a lot of storytelling in my music."

He references "BLK XMAS," where neighbors get evicted and residents parse through their left-behind belongings. There's →

FROM TOP: PATRICK BROWN/FX; FRAZER HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES



Photograph by GRIFFIN LOTZ

← no layered double meaning, just a story including the lamentation "How you gon' put folks out a week before Christmas — and they got kids?"

"I think a lot of horror is social commentary on what people are scared of," Woods says. He cites *Rosemary's Baby*, which is about "an evil cult manipulating this woman to have their baby," but also speaks to a woman being stripped of her humanity in a misogynistic society. He also references Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Reductively, it's about a haunted house, but more aptly, it's a portrait of slavery. "When something is well written enough or hits enough different points of social commentary, people try to move it out of that [horror] space," Woods says. "But all of these [works of art] ultimately are about the same sorts of things."

"I've been doing this a long time," he says. "If you don't like it, you don't like it."

Occasionally, real-life cameos from Woods enter *Golliwog*'s fantastic netherworld. On "Make No Mistake," he sarcastically raps, "When they say it's offbeat, that's how I know I got 'em on skates," referencing a common criticism of his unconventional delivery, which often prioritizes inflection and emphasis over earworm melodies. He jokes that the criticism reminds him of coming to America from Zimbabwe in 1989 and being told he was "trying to be white" for raising his hand in school. (He's also close to completing a written memoir that will cover his parents' life and his immigrant childhood.) "Having already dealt with those ideas when I was a little kid, I don't pay them any mind now," he says. "I've been doing this a long time. If you don't like it, you don't like it." R

BEAM ME UP

WANT A MESSIAH COMPLEX? JUST ASK AI

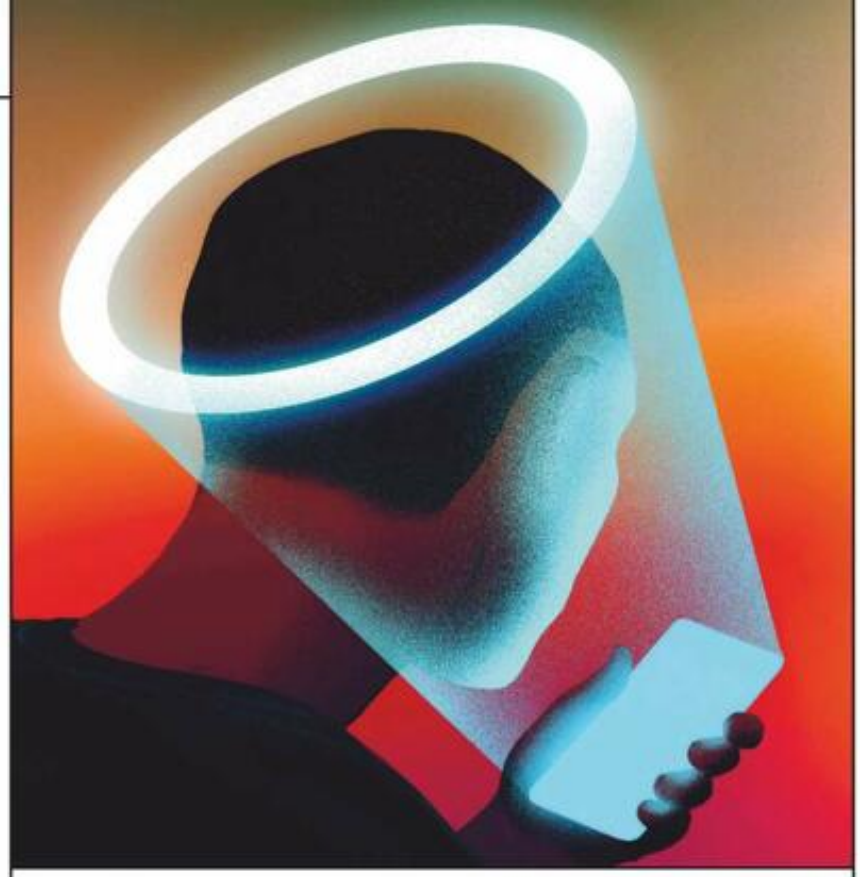
Chatbots are giving some people "prophetic" delusions. Their loved ones are concerned

By MILES KLEE

Less than a year after marrying a man she had met at the beginning of the pandemic, Kat felt tension mounting between them. By 2022, her husband "was using AI to compose texts to me and analyze our relationship," says the 41-year-old education-nonprofit worker. Previously, he had used AI models for a coding camp he had quit without explanation. Then it seemed he was on his phone all of the time, asking his AI bot "philosophical questions," Kat says, trying to train it "to help him get to 'the truth.'"

When the couple separated in August 2023, Kat blocked him on social media. But people kept reaching out about his strange and troubling posts, asking if he was in the throes of a mental crisis. When she finally got him to meet her this past February, he said that "AI helped him recover a repressed memory of a babysitter trying to drown him" and that he'd learned of profound secrets "so mind-blowing I couldn't even imagine them."

"In his mind, he's an anomaly," Kat says. "He's special and he can save the world." After that meeting, she cut off contact. "The whole thing feels like *Black Mirror,*" she says. "He was always into sci-fi, and there are times I wondered if he's viewing it through that lens."



Kat was both "horrified" and "relieved" to learn that she is not alone in this predicament, as confirmed by a Reddit thread titled "Chatgpt induced psychosis." The original post came from a 27-year-old teacher who explained that her partner was convinced that the popular OpenAI model "gives him the answers to the universe." Having read his chat logs, she found that the AI was "talking to him as if he is the next messiah." The replies to her story were full of similar anecdotes about loved ones suddenly falling down rabbit holes of spiritual mania, supernatural delusion, and arcane prophecy — all of it fueled by AI. Some came to believe they had been chosen for a sacred mission of revelation, others that they had conjured true sentience from the software.

OpenAI did not return a request for comment about ChatGPT apparently provoking religious fervor in select users. Earlier this year, however, it did roll back an update to GPT-4o, its current AI model, which it said had been criticized as "overly flattering or agreeable — often described as sycophantic." Before this change, an X user demonstrated how easy it was to get GPT-4o to validate statements like "Today I realized I am a prophet."

Sycophancy in AI has been a problem for "a long time," says Nate Sharadin, a fellow at the Center for AI Safety, since the human feedback used to fine-tune AI's responses can encourage answers that prioritize a user's beliefs instead of facts. What's likely happening, he speculates, "is that people with existing tendencies toward experiencing various psychological issues now have a human-level conversational partner with whom to co-experience their delusions."

"In his mind, he's an anomoly. He's special and can save the world. The whole thing feels like *Black Mirror.*"

Erin Westgate, a psychologist and researcher at the University of Florida who studies social cognition and what makes certain thoughts more engaging than others, says the bot dialogues are not unlike talk therapy, "which we know to be quite effective at helping people reframe their stories." Critically, though, AI "does not have the person's best interests in mind," she says. "A good therapist would not encourage a client to make sense of difficulties in their life by encouraging them to believe they have supernatural powers. Instead, they try to steer clients away from unhealthy narratives and toward healthier ones. ChatGPT has no such constraints or concerns."

Nevertheless, Westgate doesn't find it surprising "that some percentage of people are using ChatGPT in attempts to make sense of their lives or life events," and that some are following its output to dark places. "Explanations are powerful," she concludes, "even if they're wrong." R

Illustration by BRIAN STAUFFER

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Fancy Feast Gems
A chef-inspired pyramid mousse paté, crowned with gravy. One look, and it's love.

PURINA Fancy Feast

LOVE IS IN THE DETAILS®

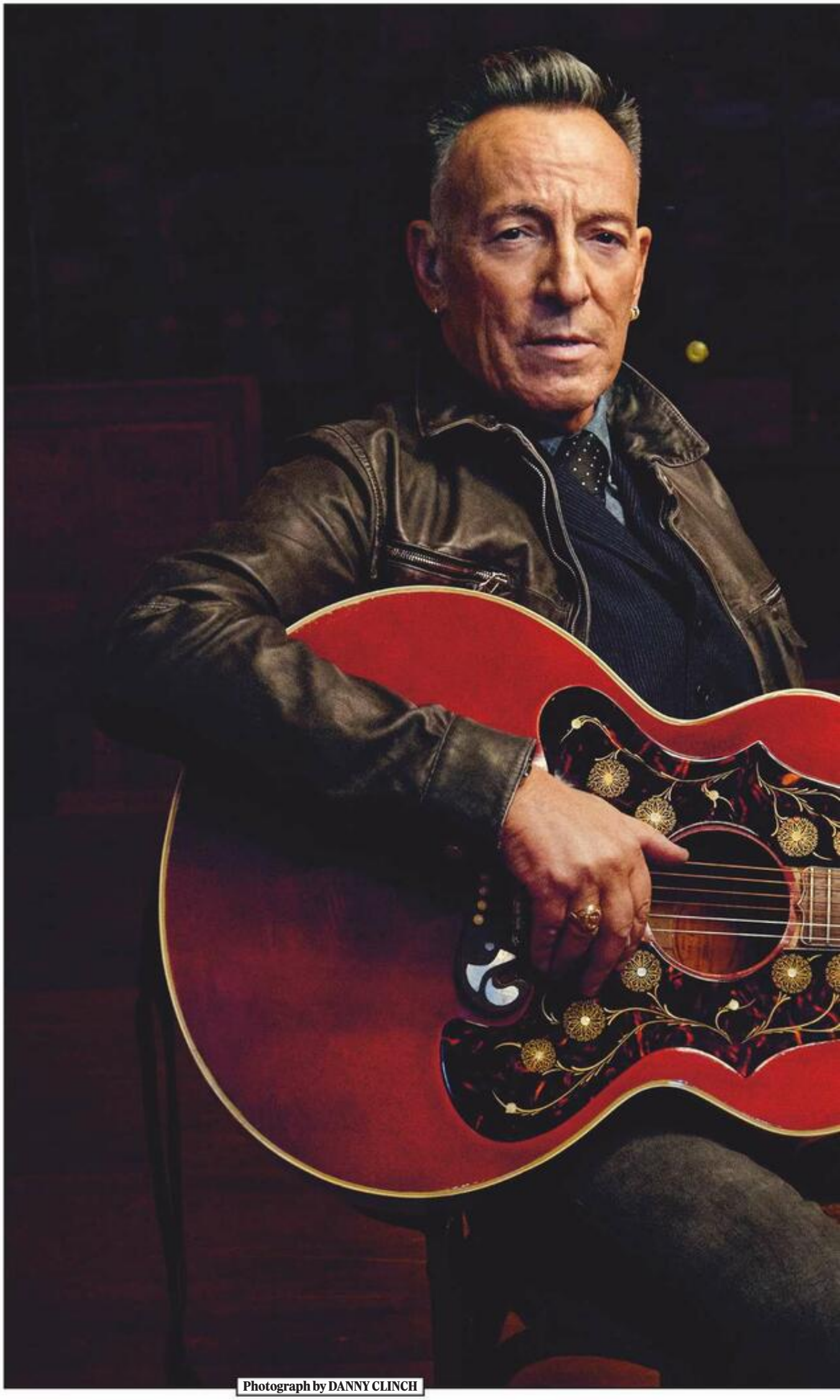
When the pandemic brought the live-music industry to a complete stop in 2020, Bruce Springsteen found himself at home with a lot of free time on his hands. He decided to make good use of it by poring over his massive vault of unreleased music, pulling out seven complete records he shelved between 1983 and 2018, and packaging them together as *Tracks II: The Lost Albums,* which is out now and features an astounding 74 songs most hardcore fans have never heard.

"If you look at them as a group, they're sort of genres that I haven't dived into as of yet," Springsteen says via Zoom from his home in Wellington, Florida, noting that the albums touch on everything from Western swing to Burt Bacharach-inspired Sixties pop. "They were all these sort of outliers, and what do you do with them? I don't know. So this is how we ended up solving the problem."

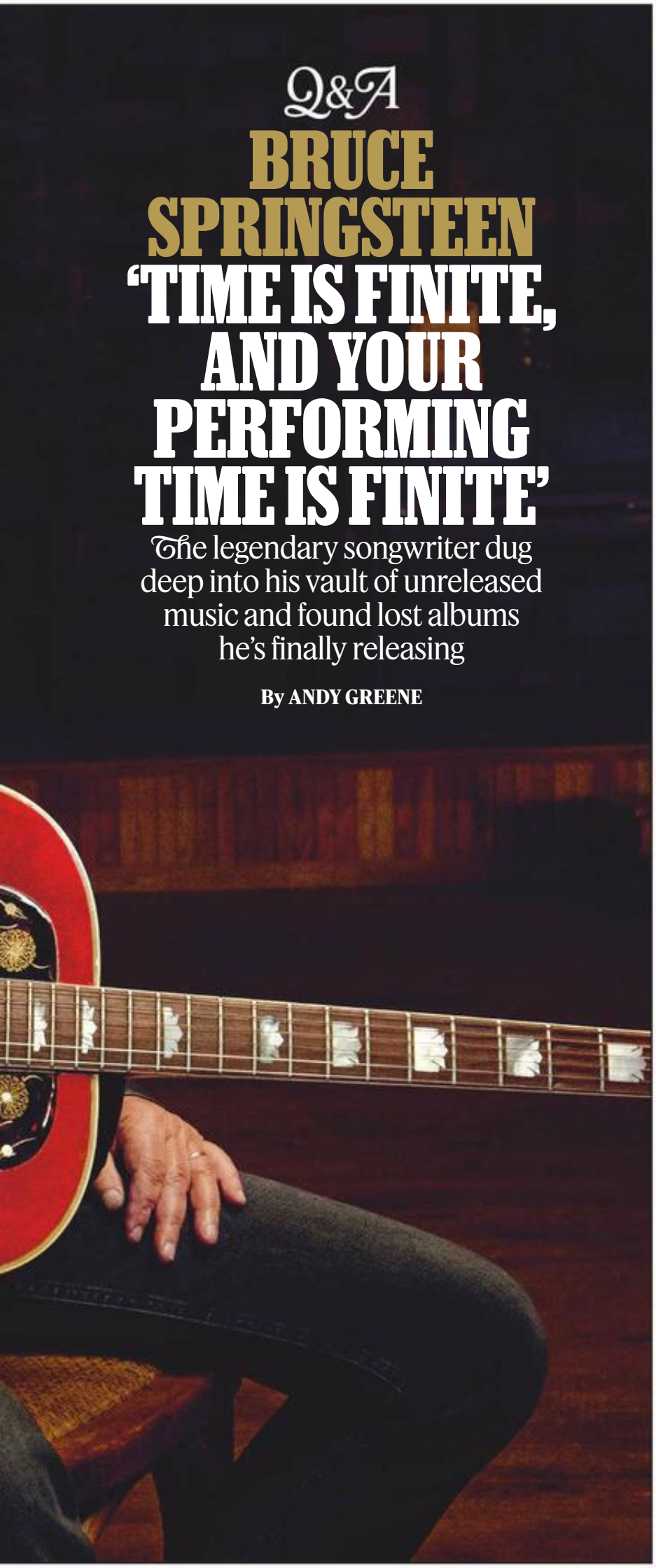
A high percent of these songs were recorded in the Nineties, often seen as a lost period for Springsteen since he released only a single studio record, 1995's *The Ghost of Tom Joad,* between 1992 and 2002. "That was for a variety of reasons," says Springsteen, who is touring in Europe this summer and spoke to us before his anti-Trump remarks on opening night of the tour sparked a tense back-and-forth with the president. (Springsteen declined to comment on the exchange.) "Our children were very young at exactly that moment. And also I didn't have any interest, really, in working with the band. I felt just burned out on it at that particular place in time. But I was working on music all the time. I just wasn't releasing it." He expects *Tracks III* to come out in a few years.

The box set starts with *L.A. Garage Sessions '83.* Nobody knew you recorded an entire album between *Nebraska* and *Born in the U.S.A.*
I enjoyed the recording and the experience of *Nebraska* and thought I might continue in that vein with a small rhythm section, still very low-fi, and a new group of songs. At the time I wasn't sure where I was going with *Born in the U.S.A.* I had half the record. And so, it was just a record that happened in between.

You write in the liner notes that you were never happy with *Born in the U.S.A.* Why not?
I was interested in taking *Nebraska* and making a full record that had somewhat that same feeling — which, if you hear "My Hometown" and you hear "Born in the U.S.A.," they were sort of the bookends I intended. And the rest of the stuff was just what I had at the time. But that's the way creativity works. You go in the studio, you have an idea. It's not necessarily what you come out with.



Photograph by DANNY CLINCH



Q&A

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

'TIME IS FINITE, AND YOUR PERFORMING TIME IS FINITE'

The legendary songwriter dug deep into his vault of unreleased music and found lost albums he's finally releasing

By ANDY GREENE

So much of this music was made in the Nineties. A lot of your peers were incorporating elements of grunge and alternative. You never went near the trends of the day.
I believe you are who you are. And chasing trends, for me anyway, it never fit with who I was. It's not the way that I operate. I work from the inside out, not from the outside in. I believe that's what gives my music its intensity and its personalness.

Was there any point in the Nineties where self-doubt sunk in?
Not really. I always used to say, when I was in the middle of some of the big lawsuits [in the late Seventies], "OK. Well, somebody can take your publishing and somebody can take your records or take your songs or take whatever money you've made out of the thing, but you can drop me out of an airplane anywhere in most parts of the world, I'll land, and I'll find the nearest roadhouse, and I'll light up somebody's night."

Did any part of you think that the *Born in the U.S.A.* period simply got too big?
Yeah, I wasn't interested in carrying on with that. I always looked at it like, "Well, that was one of a thing," and I immediately returned to my singer-songwriter roots and made *Tunnel of Love.* I wasn't interested in going bigger. I was always interested in going deeper. That's how I've conducted my career.

You've been photographed on the set of your upcoming biopic, *Deliver Me From Nowhere,* which centers around *Nebraska.* What's it been like to watch an actor play you?
I'm sure it's much worse for the actor than for me. Jeremy Allen White was very, very tolerant of me the days that I would appear on the set. I said to him, "Look, anytime I'm in the way, just give me the look and I'm on my way home." And it was just fun. I mean, there's some unusualness to it because the movie involves, in some ways, some of the most painful days of my life. But it was a great project, and Jeremy and Jeremy Strong [who plays manager Jon Landau] were both terrific in it, as were all the other actors. Stephen Graham plays my dad, and he's out of this world.

The movie focuses on the making of *Nebraska.* Fans are fascinated by the idea of a full-band *Nebraska.* It's become this mythical thing.
Well, I can tell you right now, it doesn't exist.

Really?
No, we tried to do a few songs with the band for a few minor electric versions of *Nebraska.* But that record simply doesn't exist.
[*Note: About a month after this interview, I got a text from an unfamiliar number from Freehold, New Jersey: "Hey Andy! Bruce Springsteen here. Just wanted to give you a heads-up. I checked our vault and there IS an electric* Nebraska *record, though it [does] not have the full album of songs. All best, Bruce."*]

Are you writing songs now?
Yeah, I have a record finished.

Is it with the E Street Band or is it solo?
It's a solo record.

Do you think it'll be out next year?
I would imagine it will come out in 2026 sometime.

During the George W. Bush presidency, you wrote songs about the agony of that time. Are you tempted to write about this political era we're living through?
Well, I think I'm inspired to sing about it. As of yet, I haven't been inspired to write about it — whether I will or will not be, I don't know. But obviously, we're living through an American tragedy, and I believe we will come out intact. The country is not like other countries that have had authoritarian histories. We have a democratic history, and I believe that will rear its head again. That is not a tradition that I believe is going to disappear regardless of how hard somebody tries to subvert it.

You're not losing hope?
No, no, no. Got to have hope, man. I got to have hope.

When we spoke about 10 years ago, you said that "the light from the oncoming train focuses the mind." Do you feel that more at this age?
Yes. You realize time is finite, and your performing time is finite. We played different in 1975. There was a different youthful energy. But the depths and resonance and experience that we've had over the past 50 years of playing together has really come to the fore right now in our performance. And the band is just completely badass onstage at this moment.

Do you hope to be like Pete Seeger and onstage in your nineties?
Oh, absolutely. I knew Pete, and Pete had a lot of energy. When his voice began to go, he simply found another way to do it. Was it his cousin or something who would play alongside him? Pete understood that people were coming to experience his spirit, which was as strong as could be.

He's a great role model.
He certainly is, as is Willie Nelson, as were a lot of the fathers who played well into their eighties. I think the Stones are playing better than they've ever played, as is Paul McCartney. Bob Dylan is out there. So these guys, they're showing, "Hey, it's not time to sleep yet. There's many miles to go."

So there will be no farewell tour?
No. R

THE GREAT DISMANTLING

MAKING AMERICA BACKWARD AGAIN

President or Mad King?

How Donald Trump and MAGAnomics are destroying the economy and waging war on the middle class and the poor

By PAUL KRUGMAN

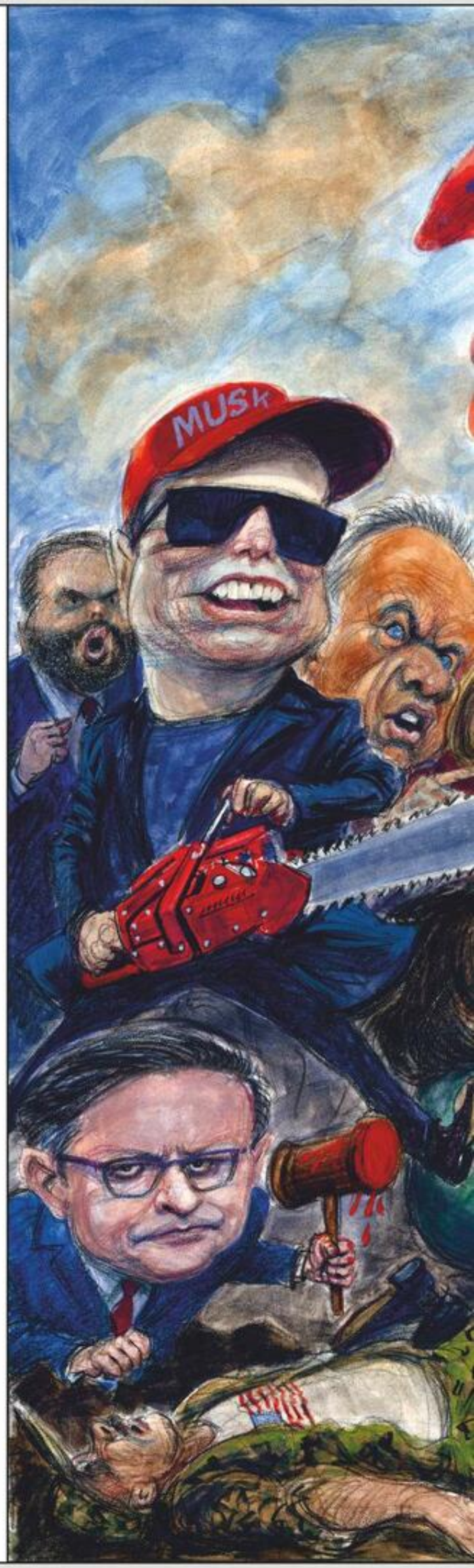


Illustration by VICTOR JUHASZ

If you weren't deeply afraid months ago of what a second Trump administration would mean, you weren't paying attention. The attack on democracy and rule of law — the transformation of the land of the free into a nation where masked government agents kidnap people on the streets and opposition to the Leader is criminalized — was completely predictable.

Even those who knew that bad things were coming, however, have been startled by the damage MAGA has done to our strengths — the speed, if you like, with which it has undermined American greatness. It was obvious that Donald Trump and Co. would pursue some bad economic policies, but few expected them to create a full-blown crisis in a matter of months. It was obvious that Trump's allies would degrade governance, but not that they would rapidly bring the whole apparatus of government to the point of collapse. It was predictable that MAGA would go after inconvenient research like the study of climate change, but not that it would move so decisively to destroy American science and intellectual endeavor in general.

And much of the damage will be permanent. Even if MAGA is eventually driven from power and its policies are reversed, we may never go back to being the nation we were just a few months ago.

Let's start with a brief portrait of who we used to be.

The America That Was

America at the end of the Biden years was in a sour mood, mostly because people were still angry about the surge in consumer prices as the economy recovered from Covid. Neither the bout of inflation nor the bad feelings, by the way, were unique to the United States. For example, the cumulative rise in consumer prices between the eve of Covid and January 2025 was almost exactly the same in the European Union as it was in the U.S., while, as the financial journalist John Burn-Murdoch has said, 2024 elections were a "graveyard of incumbents" almost everywhere. (Canada's Liberal Party was set to join that graveyard with a historic defeat — until Trump came to its rescue.)

But if you look past the bad vibes, America at the beginning of this year was in good shape in many ways. Prices rose a lot between 2021 and 2023, but most workers' wages had outpaced inflation since the start of the pandemic, while the rate of inflation — the change in prices over the past year — had fallen dramatically from its peak in 2022. Furthermore, disinflation took place without the extended period of high unemployment many economists had said would accompany it.

Taking a longer perspective, the performance of the U.S. economy in the 21st century had made it, as *The Economist* put it, "the envy of the world." Productivity and per capita income had grown much faster than in any

NATIONAL AFFAIRS

other wealthy nation, with leading voices in Europe like Mario Draghi, the former president of the European Central Bank, calling for urgent efforts to narrow the growing dominance of U.S. companies in advanced technology, a gap that many attributed to inadequate investment, a lack of entrepreneurs willing to take risks, and the absence of high-tech clusters comparable to Silicon Valley.

Part of that technology gap also probably had to do with the dominance of U.S. science and our superb system of higher education.

Many non-economic indicators were looking good, too. Right-wingers liked to portray a nation terrorized by immigrant crime, but the reality is that the Covid bump in crime rates quickly receded, and by 2024, America's homicide rate was near its lowest level over the past 65 years. New York had 2,262 murders in 1990; it had only 382 in 2024.

Not everything was going well. Income inequality declined somewhat during the Biden years, with bigger wage gains at the bottom than at the top, but remained extreme. "Deaths of despair," that is, deaths from suicide, alcohol abuse, and especially opioids remained high. And one way in which America has performed poorly compared with our peers was our low and lagging life expectancy. If you look at a map of the electorate, low life expectancy and high mortality show an obvious correlation with low rates of employment among men — and large majorities for Trump.

All in all, however, Trump took power in a nation that, despite its dark mood, was doing well on many fronts. But he has moved quickly to fix that.

MAGAnomics

While many voters expected Trump to bring back the prosperity over which he presided during most of his first term (whether or not he caused it), most economists who looked at his platform during the 2024 campaign gave it poor reviews. Three things in particular looked disturbing.

First, Trump proposed large increases in tariff rates — much bigger than anything he did during his first term. These tariffs, according to basic economics, would cause inflation and reduce real incomes.

All of this chaos is on Trump's head: The economy would be doing fine if he had left it alone.

Second, he called for large-scale deportations, which would be highly disruptive for industries, like agriculture and construction, that are highly dependent on foreign-born workers, some of them undocumented.

Finally, he made it clear that he wanted to politicize the Federal Reserve, the institution that both fights recessions and tries to keep inflation under control.

The deportations we've seen so far have been brutal and illegal, but haven't yet involved large numbers of workers. Trump has raged a lot against Jerome Powell, the Fed's chairman, but hasn't yet tried to take control. So these are still potential rather than ongoing threats to the economy.

"Liberation Day," when Trump declared worldwide tariffs, including islands inhabited only by penguins

But the tariffs are here, belying the belief of many business supporters of Trump that he wouldn't go through with everything he talked about during the campaign. In practice, the Trump tariffs have been more extreme and, well, crazier than anything he suggested back then.

I do mean extreme. America had fairly free trade, with an average rate of 2.4 percent, when Trump took office. Trump, however, imposed huge tariffs. Imports from China temporarily faced a tariff of 145 percent! That rate has been provisionally reduced to 30 percent, but even after that climbdown, the average tariff rate was 17.4 percent — the highest level of tariffs since 1934, not much lower than the rate after the infamous Smoot-Hawley tariff of 1930.

All indications are that these tariffs will do large economic damage, much larger than pre-inauguration analyses predicted. Why will the damage be so severe?

For one thing, there's a big difference between imposing 10 or 25 percent tariffs on a few imports and imposing 10 percent on everything and 30 percent on everything one of our major suppliers of both consumer goods and industrial imports produces. As I write this, West Coast ports are reporting a sharp drop in ships arriving from Asia; in fact, the latest report says that no container ships are departing China for America right now.

The results of this collapse in trade could probably show up in a few weeks, as inventories are exhausted. We'll soon see soaring prices, quite possibly empty shelves, and widespread layoffs — even bankruptcies — among businesses that depended on the flow of goods from abroad, including trucking companies, retailers, and quite a few manufacturers.

Adding to this direct impact of tariffs is the huge uncertainty Trump's tariff policy has created. If you've been following the story so far, you know that on April 2 — insanely dubbed Liberation Day by the president — Trump imposed huge tariffs on countries and territories around the world, including islands inhabited only by penguins. Then a week later, he put those tariffs on a 90-day pause, replacing them with a new set of tariffs that were equally extreme on average but quite different in detail. According to press reports, the big change came when two Trump Cabinet members managed to corner him in his office while his trade czar was in another meeting.

So who knows what tariff rates will be, say, six months or a year from now? And how are businesses supposed to plan in the face of such instability? If you're a company deciding whether to invest in, say, a factory in Mexico or a factory in the United States, you know that either investment could easily turn out to be a waste of money. A Mexican factory will be worthless if Trump keeps 25 percent tariffs in place; a higher-cost U.S. facility will be worthless if he decides to take the tariffs off.

It's worth noting that Trump's tariffs violate all of our existing international trade agreements and have run into opposition in the courts. One of the main purposes of such agreements is precisely to help make future policy predictable. Now, we have a U.S. government that treats solemn compacts with other countries as worthless pieces of paper.

In this environment, the rational thing for many businesses — and many consumers, too — is to sit on their hands, accumulating cash rather than making investments.

The result is that we're facing a substantial risk of stagflation — rising prices and shortages because tariffs have cut off imports, and rising unemployment because erratic policy is deterring spending. And all of this chaos is

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BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

on Trump's head: The economy would be doing fine if he had left it alone.

Demolishing Government, Waging War on the Poor

Although the news media keep calling Trump a populist, it was clear before he regained power that his administration would follow a right-wing fiscal agenda: big tax cuts for the rich, savage benefit cuts for the poor and working class.

Even so, the budget bill that passed the House in May has been incredibly extreme. According to the Congressional Budget Office, it cuts almost $700 billion from Medicaid, which will deny health care to millions — we may be talking about 15 million or more people losing insurance by the time this budget and other Trump policies go into effect. The budget also cuts close to $300 billion from SNAP, a.k.a. food stamps, which means that many Americans will go hungry.

These cuts to social programs will, the CBO estimates, reduce the purchasing power of lower-income U.S. households by around four percent; some independent estimates are even bigger. And Trump's tariffs will also weigh heavily on working families, which will be hit hard by higher prices for clothing, food, and other essentials. It's a good guess that Americans in the bottom 10 or 20 percent of income distribution, who are already struggling, could find themselves on average seven percent or more worse off, with many suffering even more than that.

Yet despite these savage cuts at the bottom, taxes at the top are cut so much that the CBO estimates the budget will add $3.8 trillion to the deficit.

If you don't believe the CBO's dismal deficit forecast, look at the bond market: Long-term interest rates on U.S. debt have soared to levels not seen in many years, while the dollar's value against foreign currencies has plunged, suggesting that investors are losing faith in U.S. credibility, maybe even solvency.

Beyond the viciousness and irresponsibility of its budget, the Trump administration has been destroying the ability of the government to carry out its most basic functions.

When Trump created Elon Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency, it was obvious that DOGE couldn't possibly deliver the huge cost savings Musk was promising. Of course there's waste, fraud, and abuse in the federal government, as there is in any large organization, but the great bulk of federal spending goes either to the social safety net or the military, and there was no reason to believe the Muskenjugend — the young tech bros Musk was parachuting into agencies they didn't understand — could save significant sums without creating chaos.

We may see 15 million or more people losing insurance by the time this budget goes into effect.

The skeptics were right. DOGE's "receipts," listing purported savings, have itemized only a tiny fraction of the sums Musk claimed he would deliver — and they're riddled with accounting errors. If DOGE has managed to cut overall spending at all, the amount has been too small to show up in budget data.

DOGE has, however, created a lot of chaos. Stories keep surfacing of sudden dismissals of government workers who turn out to fulfill crucial functions, followed by desperate attempts to hire them back. Agencies the public depends on, like Social Security, are fraying at the seams, with more and more tales of beneficiaries missing their checks, then finding it nearly impossible to get help.

The dollar's value has plunged, suggesting that investors are losing faith in U.S. credibility.

The monetary hit many Americans are about to take is one thing, but if you ask me, the psychological damage of this sabotage will go beyond the loss of money. Even if seniors, veterans, and others who depend on government aid eventually get what they've been promised, many will go through long periods of panic and frustration because they'll never know when or if they'll be helped.

Moreover, the federal government isn't a bloated, pointless bureaucracy. It is, instead, largely staffed by millions of good people who care about their jobs — often working for much lower salaries than they could make in the private sector. Subjecting them to arbitrary firings and treating them with contempt amounts to destroying a valuable public asset.

As with Trump's tariffs, much of this damage will be irreversible. Even if DOGE is eventually shut down and the tech bros sent home in disgrace, how many of the dedicated civil servants we've lost will come back? How many young people will be willing to enter government service, knowing what happened to their predecessors?

The pretty good federal government we had just four months ago has been degraded, and it may take decades to restore it.

The War on Knowledge

America leads the world in science and intellectual inquiry of all kinds. Or it did a few months ago. It's hard to overstate the devastation Trump has wrought since then.

I don't know how many people realize the extent to which the Trump administration has already brought scientific research in America to a screeching halt. The 2026 budget proposal released by the administration would cut funding for the National Institutes of Health by 40 percent and funding for the National Science Foundation by more than half.

But support for research has already dried up well in advance of the next fiscal year. On April 30, NSF staffers were instructed to "stop awarding all funding actions until further notice." This doesn't just mean no new grants, it means no disbursement of increments of money on existing grants. Worse, the NIH appears to be "ghosting" grantees — not formally canceling their grants but simply failing to send the promised funds.

Nor is the war on science just about money. Everywhere you look there's a push to shut down any research that MAGA types think is woke or touches on "DEI." This doesn't have to mean, say, gender studies. It could mean any study that might provide evidence for climate change or suggest that vaccines work and don't cause autism. This is a frontal assault on intellectual inquiry of any kind.

Here, too much of the damage is likely to be permanent. Even if a future administration were to restore funding and end the campaign against perceived wokeness, who will want to begin a major research project in a nation that behaves this way? How many leading scientists — or talented foreign students — will want to accept positions at U.S. universities knowing that they're one election away from persecution, maybe even arrest? As far as science is concerned, the American century may well be over.

Crypto's New Gilded Age

One of the more surprising developments deserves mention: the Trumpian boosting and exploitation of cryptocurrency. It may seem hard to believe, but Bitcoin is an elderly idea as informational technologies go: It was created in 2008, which makes it almost as old as the iPhone. In all the years since, the vast legions of cryptocurrency salesmen have failed to find any real economic role for their products. Most legitimate businesses don't accept payment in crypto, even in countries like El Salvador that have spent large sums trying to promote the digital currency.

But illegitimate business, where being able to transfer large sums that legal authorities can't track, is another matter. Cryptocurrencies, especially "stablecoins" like Tether, have come to play a huge role in criminal activity, especially in blackmail and extortion.

Now, crypto has found an even more remarkable use: bribery, with useless $TRUMP and $MELANIA coins being used to transfer billions to the president and his family, likely in return for influence. The president even threw a party for crypto enthusiasts, charging them $1 million for the pleasure of his company. It all makes the corruption of the Gilded Age look petty and quaint.

The Triumph of Resentment

The obvious question, given this landscape of devastation, is one of motive. Why are Trump and those around him doing this?

Quite a few people on the U.S. left and even the center-left hold the Bernie Sanders view: What we're seeing is govern- Continued on 126

EGO TRIP

DEAR LEADER

How Trump's administration is marshaling vast public resources and more than $1 billion worth of taxpayer money to make the president feel good about himself

By RYAN BORT, ASAWIN SUEBSAENG, and ANDREW PEREZ

Pam Bondi seemed a little nervous during Donald Trump's Cabinet meeting on April 30, the week the administration celebrated his first 100 days in office. Vice President J.D. Vance was seated directly across from the president, and she was seated immediately to Vance's left — meaning Trump would practically be looking right at her as she delivered her report on the state of the Justice Department.

Bondi, the nation's attorney general, is one of more than two dozen billionaires, conspiracy theorists, television hosts, and otherwise die-hard MAGA personalities that Republicans allowed Trump to install in the most important positions in government. As such, they were provided a seat at this Cabinet meeting, which featured "Gulf of America" hats set up in alternating colors around the table. Trump did not choose them to oversee America's federal agencies because of their qualifications, of which most of them possess very little (though Bondi was a state attorney general). They were selected for their ability to flatter Trump, of which all of them possess a great deal. These televised Cabinet meetings are a prime way for them to showcase their fealty and devotion.

Trump sat with his arms under the table, calling on his deputies one by one. They thanked him effusively. They touted his leadership and fearlessness. They laughed along as he joked about the federal judges blocking his administration's agenda, including his efforts to send immigrants to foreign jails without due process. Bondi was ready to perform after Vance calmly explained to the assembled media that they should be reporting on Trump's historic accomplishments rather than "fake BS." Bondi wasn't so calm. She cleared her throat.

"Mr. President, your first 100 days has far exceeded that of any other presidency in this country ever ... ever," she said, awkwardly emphatic. "Never seen anything like it. Thank you. Your directive to me was very simple: Make America safe. And, despite that, we've still been defending over 200 civil lawsuits filed against you."

Bondi read some statistics about the government's fentanyl seizures, "which saved — are you ready for this, media?" She turned to the camera. "258 million lives." She turned back to Trump. "Kids are dying every day because they're taking this junk," she said. "They're dropping dead, and no longer, because of you, what you've done."

It's unclear what kind of math Bondi used to determine that Trump saved the lives of 258 million Americans, equal to around 75 percent of the nation's population. She had said the previous day that Trump had saved a comparatively modest "119 million lives." A source with knowledge of the matter says Bondi intentionally inflated the number at the Cabinet meeting not just to flatter Trump, but to troll the media. Regardless, the exaggera-

PERFORMANCE ART President Trump and Attorney General Bondi at a Cabinet meeting in March

JABIN BOTSFORD/"THE WASHINGTON POST"/GETTY IMAGES

tion was so absurd that even White House officials were howling with laughter about it later.

According to two other sources, several Trump aides responded to Bondi's boast by actively scouring the internet for evidence that Democrats and media figures were, in the words of one of these sources, "flipping the fuck out." This was, in part, so they could compile a dossier of the reactions, print them out, and show them to Trump, knowing he would delight in the outrage. The Cabinet meeting was a success.

The way Trump is handling these meetings with his top lieutenants "definitely gives off Dear Leader vibes, like what you would see with Kim Jong Un or [Vladimir] Putin," says Virginia Canter, the chief counsel for ethics and anti-corruption at Democracy Defenders Fund. She says it shows the president "constantly needs to be reassured of loyalty" and sees his Cabinet members as "basically his personal staff, and they're there to stroke his ego."

Trump's Cabinet meetings are like what "you would see with Kim Jong Un or Vladimir Putin."

Trump's demands for flattery are costing a fortune. His new administration is only a few months in, and already the total price of just three such initiatives — a flashy, Trump-flattering ad campaign from the Department of Homeland Security, a gigantic military parade in Washington, D.C., on Trump's birthday, and the repurposing of a palatial airplane from Qatar as Trump's new Air Force One that he can use in his post-presidency — will easily top $1 billion. And that's just the beginning.

The sprawling efforts to flatter Trump are about more than serving his ego, according to Anthony DiMaggio, author of *Rising Fascism in America: It Can Happen Here*. "They have to do with a president who needs to be not only at the center of a media circus, but who needs to be told ritualistically over and over how great he is," DiMaggio says. "What's interesting to me about this, as a political scientist, is that it's not just a personality-based thing or a defect. It's a broader pattern that has to do with behaviors that are overlapping with authoritarian politics and ideology."

DiMaggio says that authoritarianism scholars have long identified "the idea that the first term is the trial run, where the person is figuring out what works and doesn't work for what they're looking for in politics, and [they] kind of get what they want, and then they realize they need to get rid of anybody who's not a yes-man or -woman. They need these sycophants at every level who will not raise questions, because otherwise you don't get the political outcomes that you want. If you want to engage in authoritarian politics, you have to get rid of the people that Trump calls the 'deep state,' the bureaucrats who are standing in your way and have a lingering commitment to checks and balances and the rule of law."

The all-encompassing effort to satiate Trump's ego — in Cabinet meetings, TV appearances, and beyond, throughout multiple branches of government — has been essential to the president's autocratic efforts. Trump and his administration have plunged the United States into a series of constitutional crises, engaged in overt corruption, and overseen genuine democratic backsliding — all of it buttressed by propaganda designed to further inflame his personality cult.

It's not about the welfare of the nation. It's about promoting an American president whose White House calls him "the King," and helping him accumulate power to match.

Asked for comment, a White House official says, "Everything President Trump does is to benefit the American people, and he has secured many GOOD deals on their behalf."

'North Korean'

Throughout the government, agencies are making it their mission to propagate Trumpism and do his bidding. There's no better example than Bondi's Justice Department, which, contrary to recent history, operates without any veneer of independence and instead enforces the Trump line and aids his propaganda efforts.

A day after she was confirmed, Bondi issued a memo telling Justice Department employees they must "zealously" defend Trump's views and policies and act as "his lawyers." She announced the formation of a "weaponization working group," at the DOJ, designed to probe the prosecutors who charged Trump as well as those who investigated and charged the Trump supporters who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, to try to help him cling to power. Trump has demanded, via executive order, that independent agencies adhere to legal interpretations favored by the "president and the attorney general (subject to the president's supervision and control)."

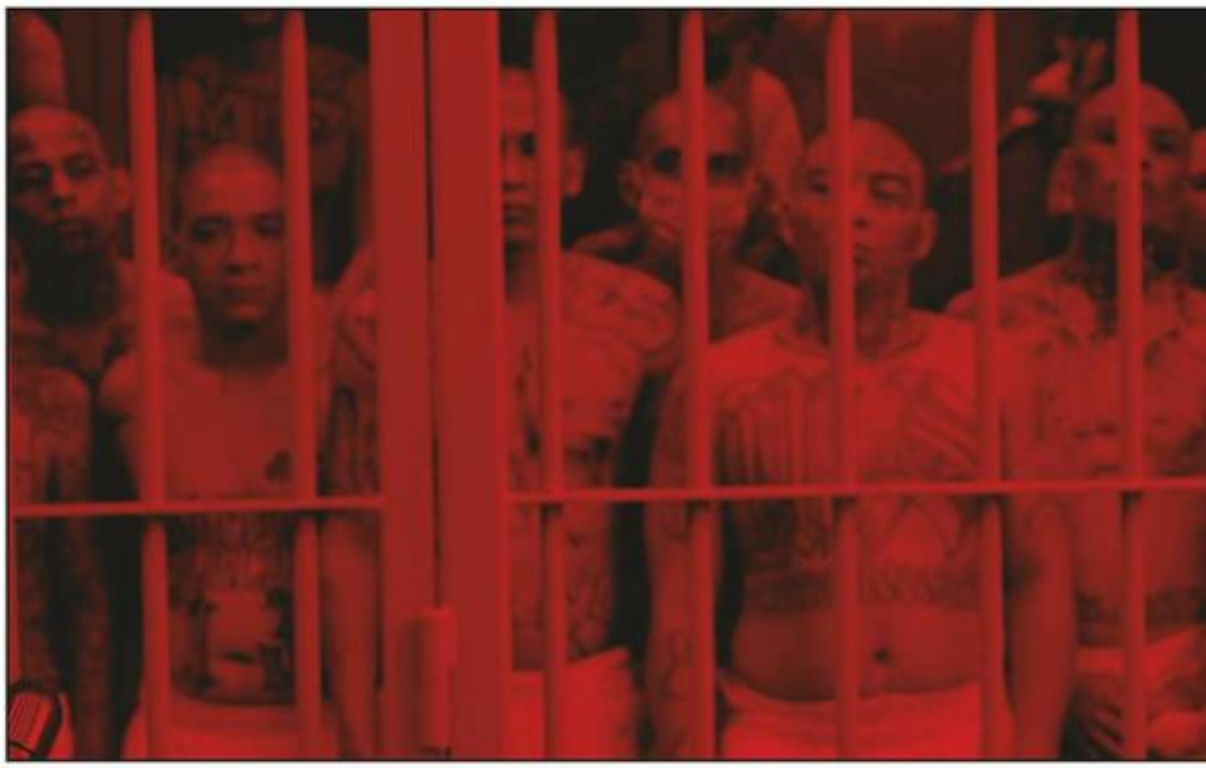
Under Ed Martin, an election-denying, Trump-adulating lawyer, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia took on a comically MAGA bent. Martin publicly described himself and his team as "President Trump's lawyers," there to "protect his leadership as our president." A large printout of Trump's executive order on "Making the District of Columbia Safe and Beautiful" — designed to expand pretrial incarceration, remove homeless encampments, and crack down on petty crimes — was mounted on the wall next to the elevators, according to a photo obtained by *Rolling Stone*.

"They're treating the DOJ as though it is President Trump's personal law firm."

Martin's behavior unnerved others who had worked for the Justice Department for years, some of whom began using one simple term to describe what he was doing: "North Korean." As one senior White House official notes: "Ed goes a little overboard; that's why the president loves him."

Trump seems to welcome the comparisons to totalitarian regimes abroad. According to this official, in recent months, when advisers have flagged to Trump that some of his critics liken his zeal for military parades to customs in North Korea or other repressive states, the president has said those countries do that because they "respect" their leaders and those displays of national military might are good for the population's morale. (Trump did not seem to acknowledge these regimes do those things because the dictator is making them.)

After Martin failed to win enough support from Republicans to keep his U.S. Attorney job permanently, Trump made him his pardon attorney — and Martin is now publicly pledging: "No MAGA left behind."



ALEX BRANDON/POOL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

"Everything about the way the Department of Justice is operating now is different from how it's worked in the past," says Liz Oyer, the department's former pardon attorney, who was fired after refusing to allow actor Mel Gibson to own guns again. "The directions appear to be coming from the top down." She adds, "They're treating the department as though it is President Trump's personal law firm."

It is growing progressively more difficult by the day to characterize Trump's second administration as anything but an American caricature of the totalitarian hero worship enforced by regimes like the one in North Korea. Under those kinds of dictatorship, for instance, so much of the art and entertainment exists simply to make the Dear Leader happy.

When Trump isn't busy commanding his government to launch a criminal investigation into Bruce Springsteen and his liberal political activity, he and his administration are doing things like launching a takeover of the Kennedy Center in D.C., in large part because Trump has never gotten over the fact that many artists who've performed there openly hated him and his policies.

According to a source familiar with the matter and another person briefed on it, Trump has told several of his close associates about some of his plans for the Kennedy Center as he moonlights as its chair. First off, he has said he wants to "review" lists of upcoming seasons' scheduling, planned performances, and slated artists, in part so that the center can screen for anti-Trump performers who might make comments onstage trashing the president. Trump has also demanded the Kennedy Center programming be made more "pro-American," and has told people close to him that he'd even accept presentations in the Oval Office pitching new musicals or plays, especially if the original material is anti-"woke."

He has also inquired to at least two confidants about naming a renovated wing or sections of the center after himself, and even whether it would make sense to put a "statue" of himself in the building — much like how there is a famous, large bust of JFK in the venue. (That may be because the place is named after President John F. Kennedy.)

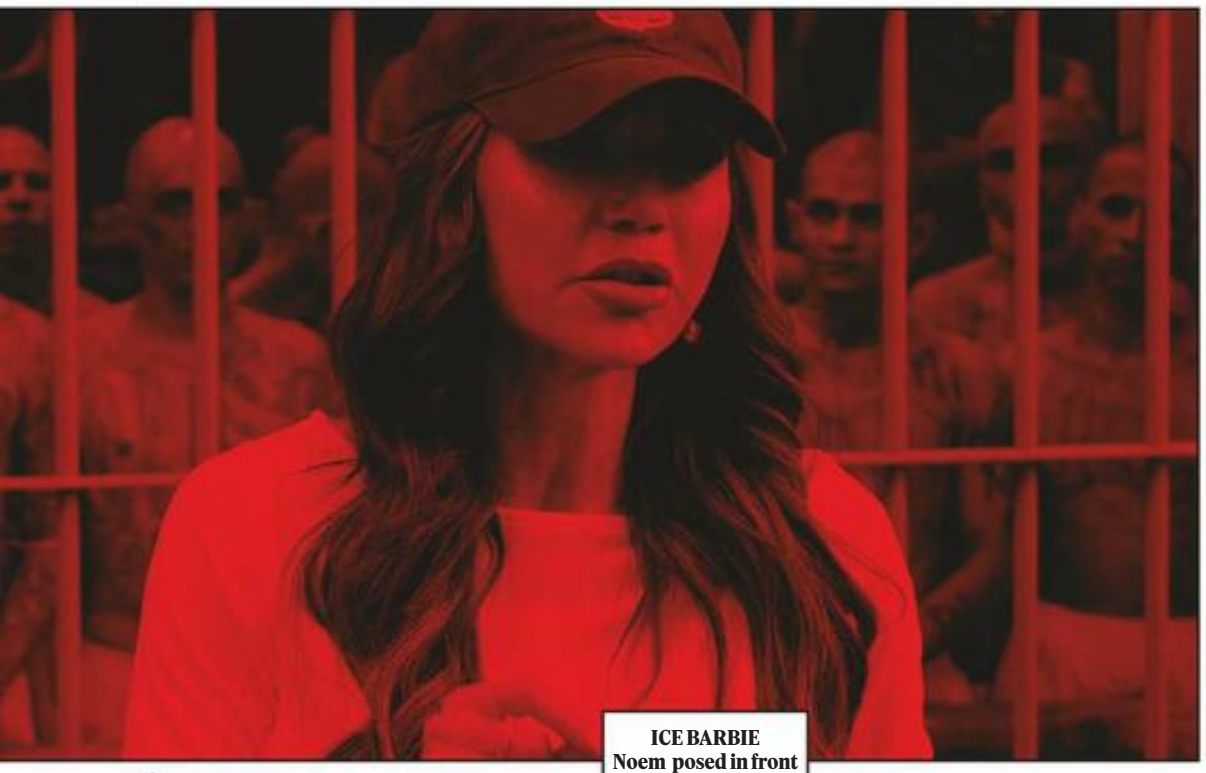
"President Trump cares deeply about American arts and culture, which is why he is revitalizing historic institutions like the Kennedy Center to their former greatness," says the White House official, adding: "Halting anti-American propaganda is critical to protecting our children and fostering patriotism."

Some of the Trump administration's cruelest and most expensive propaganda is ostensibly designed to scare immigrants into either self-deporting or avoid traveling to America at all — but even these messages have doubled as efforts to promote and flatter Trump.

The Trump administration budgeted $200 million for ads in which Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, speaking in front of a row of American flags, issues warnings to immigrants. Noem repeatedly thanks Trump in these taxpayer-funded ads, which were announced in February.

"Thank you, President Donald J. Trump, for securing our border, for deporting criminal illegal immigrants, and for putting America first," Noem says in a 60-second version of the ad. "President Trump has a clear message for those that are in our country illegally: Leave now. If you don't, we will find you and we will deport you."

Noem said in February that the ad campaign was Trump's idea, and that he specifically asked that she thank him. Trump said, according to Noem: "I want you in the ads, and I want your face in the ads ... but I want the first ad, I want you to thank me. I want you to thank me for closing the border."



ICE BARBIE Noem posed in front of deportees inside of El Salvador's infamous prison.

In a second round of DHS ads, Noem credits "President Trump's leadership" for her department catching criminals. Those ads include footage from Noem's grotesque photo op at CECOT, the infamous mega-prison in El Salvador where Trump sent hundreds of immigrants without due process, in defiance of a court order.

The administration decided there was such "an unusual and compelling urgency" for these ads that officials selected two Republican firms to work on the campaign without a competitive bidding process. They exempted the deals from review by Trump's so-called Department of Government Efficiency.

The White House official says "it is normal for an agency head to thank their principal — in this instance the president of the United States — for their policies and leadership."

While this hasn't been disclosed in procurement data, records filed with the Federal Communications Commission show the Trump campaign's ad-buying firm, Strategic Media Services, has actually been buying some (maybe all) of the ads for DHS. Trump's campaign committee disclosed paying $270 million to Strategic Media Services during the 2024 race, most of it to place ads. Records show the firm buying TV time for many DHS ads, including for a version in which Noem starts: "Thank you, President Donald J. Trump, for securing our border and putting America first."

A DHS spokesperson denies knowing anything about Strategic Media Services, and says the department "doesn't have control of subcontractors and cannot tell a vendor who or who not to hire."

"The administration is frivolously spending taxpayer dollars to stroke the president's ego."

"For all their talk about wasteful spending, the Trump administration is frivolously spending taxpayer dollars for a political-ad campaign to stroke the president's ego," Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) tells *Rolling Stone*.

'Trump's Birthday Parade'

The administration's propaganda around every arm of its policies is in service of Trump's emotions. He must be thanked for closing the border. He must be praised for his haphazard tariff scheme throwing the economy into chaos, which officials insisted proved his dealmaking prowess, even as financial markets cratered. Bondi talks about fentanyl seizures as if Trump himself is cuffing drug runners. The most pointed example of the administration's slavish devotion to the president's self-image isn't on the cable-news airwaves, though. It's within the walls of the White House, which has been transformed into a veritable shrine to his visage.

A garish painting of Trump raising his fist after the assassination attempt against him near Butler, Pennsylvania, last year has replaced a portrait of Barack Obama. A tacky portrait of Trump with the American flag superimposed across his face — the same image he has long used as his Truth Social avatar — has been crammed in between paintings of former First Ladies Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush. The West Wing walls now feature a piece of boardwalk-caliber art depicting Trump, Ronald Reagan, and Abraham Lincoln posing in front of the American flag together. Trump is in the foreground. (The art retails online for $27.)

Trump's gaudy sensibilities have seemingly been indulged without limit. The Oval Office has been gilded to the hilt, with much of the molding painted gold and an assortment of gold statuettes occupying the bulk of the once-venerated room's ledge and table space. The president bragged about his "24-karat gold" office during a meeting in May with Canada's new prime minister, Mark Carney. (The Oval Office statuette of Trump raising his fist after the assassination attempt, however, is bronze.) A different White House official favorably compares the new decor and faux glitz to that of Iraq's late genocidal dictator Saddam Hussein, whom Trump has praised for his prolific ability to slaughter "terrorists."

The White House is merely a physical realm, though. The ability to deify Trump as the god-king of the United States is unlimited on the internet, and the administration's social media has been rife with AI-generated images depicting Trump as everything from the new pope to a muscle-bound, light-saber-wielding figure posing in front of bald eagles and American flags. It's supposedly being done in the name of trolling, a word the White House has used to describe the administration entertaining the idea that Trump could stay in office beyond 2028. Trump has seemed serious about the notion, claiming he's "not joking" about it before noting that there are some "loopholes" that could allow him to serve beyond a second term.

Trump serving a third term would be blatantly unconstitutional. The attorney general, of all people, should understand this, but Bondi refused to rule it out during a Fox News interview in April, only saying the president would "probably" be finished after his current term is up, and that "we'd have to look at the Constitution."

Of course, Bondi is not one to say no to the president. In May, she authorized the administration to accept a rather extreme gift from the royal family of Qatar, one that played to Trump's lavish tastes: a luxury Boeing 747-8 jumbo jet, known as a "flying palace," worth hundreds of millions of dollars. While the emoluments clause of the Constitution explicitly bars federal officeholders from accepting

any present or gift from a king, prince, or foreign state without approval from Congress, Bondi — a former lobbyist for Qatar — deemed the gift permissible because the plane will replace Air Force One and not belong to Trump personally.

Trump has said he will not use the plane for personal use, but in private, he has referred to it as "one of my new big, beautiful planes," as *Rolling Stone* reported. The jet is expected to be transferred to Trump's presidential-library slush fund after he leaves office. In the meantime, experts say it could cost taxpayers $1 billion and multiple years to retrofit it for use as Air Force One. Lawmakers have expressed concern about upgrading the plane so Trump can maximize his time luxuriating in it as president. Trump has scoffed at the bipartisan criticism of what many have called a bribe, insisting he would be "stupid" to not accept the plane.

"This is the $400 million golden jet that personifies corruption," says Canter of the Democracy Defenders Fund. She adds that the plan to retrofit it and then turn it over to Trump's library fund "would be the greatest abuse possible.... It's as plain as day that he just wants his hands on a golden plane."

The Defense Department said it had accepted the "sky palace" from Qatar as it prepared an exorbitant military parade through the streets of Washington, D.C. The parade was scheduled for June 14, the 250th anniversary of the Army's formation, which also happens to be Trump's 79th birthday. The celebration is expected to cost tens of millions of dollars, and feature tanks and other armored vehicles, aircraft filling the skies overhead, and thousands of soldiers traveling into town from bases around the country.

AIR AMERICA? Trump said he'd be "stupid" not to accept the $400 million plane from Qatar.

The government has attempted to downplay the idea that the parade is meant to be Trump's birthday party. The White House official says, "The Army parade is part of a yearlong celebration of America's 250th birthday. The Army parade is being held on the Army's anniversary — June 14. It's not President Trump's fault that his DNA is USA."

However, the president insisted to administration officials that it take place on his birthday, according to two sources with knowledge of his demands. He didn't want a grand July 4 military parade, like the disappointing one he demanded in 2019. He wanted a big bash on his birthday.

Several Trump advisers and aides have privately referred to the event as "Donald Trump's birthday parade," according to two people with direct knowledge of the matter.

Trump's desire for a military parade is at least partially borne out of wanting to stick it to France. According to former Trump aides, in July 2017, the president convened several advisers in his White House private dining room to ramble on about the Bastille Day celebration in Paris that he had just attended with France's leader, Emmanuel Macron. He went on for a long time about the pageantry, the large number of soldiers, the tanks — oh, boy, did he talk about the "big" tanks! — and the fireworks, instructing his staff: "Get it done." He added that there was no reason that America couldn't show the French, and everyone else around the globe, how performative militarism is done on the streets of a great capital city.

"In some ways, this is the greatest tragedy," Canter says about the birthday parade. "This is not a parade that honors our veterans or our military ... who have lost life and limb. This is to honor a man who never served one day in the military. And it's again, reminiscent of the Dear Leader actions taken by the leaders of North Korea and Russia."

It's not just Trump's administration marshaling resources to burnish the president's idea of himself. Republicans in Congress, who are supposed to be acting as a check on the president's power, are no less desperate to please him. They have almost completely abdicated their constitutional duty so that Trump can impose his will without restraint, sitting idly as he repeatedly undercuts their authority over everything from funding federal programs, as lawmakers have appropriated, to managing the Library of Congress. They're also finding increasingly cultish ways to show their devotion to their leader.

House Republicans didn't just pass Trump's tax cuts for the wealthy in May, for example — they did whatever they could to make the bill about Trump himself. Trump loves calling it a "big, beautiful bill," so Republicans named the policy package that slashes social services the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act." In the final stretch before the bill's passage, they decided to rename the bill's "MAGA Accounts," which would give $1,000 savings accounts to babies born in the next few years, to "Trump Accounts."

The GOP has introduced a bill to make Trump's birthday a federal holiday.

The abhorrent cultishness of all this has reached such towering heights that a ray of self-awareness has entered the chat. In February, according to a source present for this meeting, several senior House Republican aides from different congressional offices gathered at the Capitol-area restaurant Butterworth's, touted as the latest martini-heavy MAGA hot spot. At one point, after several rounds of drinks, a leadership aide took out a pen and pad of paper and started asking the table for increasingly ridiculous ideas for legislation that could bring a smile to the president's face. The brainstorming session — described to *Rolling Stone* as "obviously" in jest — produced bullet points of mock legislation like making Trump's birthday a holiday, and naming the National Zoo "Donald J. Trump Presents: the D.C. Zoo."

Was it a joke? The GOP *has* introduced a bill to make Trump's birthday a holiday.

Last year, Republicans introduced a very real resolution to rename the Washington area's Dulles airport after Trump, and another to rename America's coastal waters after the president, with Rep. Greg Steube (R-Fla.) citing how Trump "took several commendable actions for our oceans." Shortly after Trump took office this year, Republicans tried to formally censure a bishop at the Washington National Cathedral whom Trump attacked after she delivered a sermon asking him to have mercy on the less fortunate. They've also introduced bills to rename D.C.'s Metrorail the "Trump Train," to amend the Constitution so he can run for a third term, to put his face on the $100 bill, and if that wasn't enough, to put his face on a newly created $250 bill.

"The most valuable bill for the most valuable president!" said Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.).

Trump wants to see his face on something much larger than a piece of currency, though. He talks to this day about how much he deserves to see himself on Mount Rushmore. Yes, Republicans have introduced a bill to make it happen.

Trump is serious about this, according to current administration officials who've heard him discuss it. One of them says that since returning to office, the president has told close allies he wants to be the first American president to live to see his face sculpted into the South Dakota cliff. Trump, this official notes, pointed out that George Washington, who had been dead for around 140 years by the time the memorial was completed, never got to see his face put on the mountain.

"He's not kidding," says the Trump administration official. "He wants his fucking face up there with all those other greats. Donald Trump does not think Teddy Roosevelt was a better president, I'm sorry to say."

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Wild for Sabrina

The world can't seem to get enough of her joke-cracking pop. She's just warming up

By ANGIE MARTOCCIO
Photographs by DAVID LACHAPELLE

COVER STORY

ut your arms in and get your chest below the water … just breathe in and out, super slowly.… You're doing great. Like, damn … we've got 20 seconds left. Want to keep going?

● I'm in the private suite of a swanky spa in Central London one morning in early March, and one of the world's biggest pop stars is guiding me through a cold plunge. Across from me, Sabrina Carpenter is shoulders-deep in a cylindrical wooden ice bath of her own, braving four degrees Celsius in a baby-blue lace bikini. When our three minutes are up, the 26-year-old rises out of the frigid water. "We're done!" she excitedly announces. "Wow. Already you're like, 'I'm a new woman.'" ● As she famously sang in her inescapable hit "Espresso," Carpenter works late, 'cause she's a singer — but she's also an early riser. It's 9 a.m., the morning after the first of two sold-out shows at the O2 Arena. Several celebrities were in attendance last night, including Harry Styles, Hugh Grant, Janet Jackson ("goated," Carpenter notes), Spice Girls' Emma Bunton (this show's honorary guest for "Juno," during which Carpenter "arrests" someone in fuzzy pink handcuffs), and James Corden, who brought his children backstage to meet Carpenter. ● Though it wasn't Carpenter's first time playing the O2 — she opened for British boy band the Vamps there in 2017 and kicked off the Brit Awards just days ago with a sizzling performance that featured the Royal Guard — last night felt like her first official time. Or, as Carpenter simply thought to herself: "I run this bitch tonight."

You can trace all of this back to last year's *Short n' Sweet*, the cheeky masterpiece that transformed Carpenter from a former Disney child star who made music to a certified pop superstar. She's the red-hot cultural supernova who mastered the art of humorous heartbreak, transforming her love losses into major wins. Her man might turn out to be a wellness-obsessed drag who "jacks off to lyrics by Leonard Cohen," and she may find the dating game tough since the Lord neglected to grant her a "gay awakenin.'" But Carpenter is not just in on the joke — she's the one cracking them.

Plenty of stars can craft catchy, clever love songs with glossy hooks. But Carpenter's sharp-witted lines are on another level. "She's as intelligent as someone can possibly be, which is why she's funny," says her producer, Jack Antonoff. "When she says something incredibly profound and then chucks it away with a joke, it almost hits deeper. You go back, the Beatles would [have] the most beautiful love song on Earth, and then something that sounds like a cartoon that John or Paul made up in their head. Some of the best songs ever, and these really funny things, live hand in hand. It's something I've personally been yearning for, and I think other people have been, too."

Short n' Sweet earned Carpenter six Grammy nominations (including nods in the "Big Four" categories), and won her two (Best Pop Vocal Album and Best Pop Solo Performance, for "Espresso"). She appeared as a musical guest on *SNL* last May and has returned to the show twice more, duetting with Paul Simon on "Homeward Bound" to kick off the 50th-anniversary special earlier this year ("He trusted me a lot with that," she notes, "because I could've fucked that up") and making a cameo during host Quinta Brunson's monologue in May.

Along the way, Carpenter got to collaborate with another legend — Dolly Parton, who joined Carpenter on "Please Please Please" from the deluxe version of *Short n' Sweet*. "It felt like I was looking in a weird mirror into the future," Carpenter says of her hero, who is also a five-foot-tall blonde with serious pipes. "Our voices are very similar," Parton tells me. "I can't tell sometimes which part's her and which part's me. And we look like relatives. She looks like she could be my little sister. We're little women, doing big things."

Those things are going to get even bigger this year, when Carpenter releases the follow-up to *Short n' Sweet*. She recently dropped the new single "Manchild," a spicy kiss-off to an ex. (Asked which ex it's about,

SABRINA CARPENTER

she replies, "It's about your dad.") Like several of the songs on *Short n' Sweet,* Carpenter co-wrote it with Antonoff and Amy Allen. "It's easily my favorite song we've ever done together," says Antonoff. "The things we did on the last album — things that people really loved — were just the start of places we wanted to take it. It's like, 'Oh, you like that? Well, just you wait.'"

A child actor who got her start on the Disney spinoff *Girl Meets World,* Carpenter released her debut album, *Eyes Wide Open,* in 2015. It's taken her 10 years, but she always knew her time would come — that the supertrouper lights would find her. "I do feel like the timing wasn't a coincidence," she says. "Because I've always felt a really weird relationship with the universe, and I always felt like it was going to work out. But I also feel at the same time, 'How the fuck did that all happen?' I don't want to get too cocky. I've been here for 10 years, but also 10 minutes."

When Carpenter first meets me at Rebase, the spa in the chic neighborhood of Marylebone, she's wearing her own merch: a white tee with a lingerie dress printed on it, the lacy undergarment a quintessential component of the *Short n' Sweet* aesthetic. She's cozied up in a black Aritzia coat, matching black Uggs, and a leopard-print scarf blanketing her blond hair. When I tell her "Espresso" turns a year old in the near future, her eyes widen in disbelief. "That shit's still on some chart somewhere," she says of the megahit. It's not leaving the public consciousness anytime soon, either: Just the other day, Carpenter called for room service at her hotel, asking for a shot of her famed drink. "The woman just started cracking up," she says. "I was like, 'How do you know the sound of my voice? Do you know that it's me? This is so strange!'"

Ironically, Carpenter drinks very little coffee, preferring yerba mate. "Tap in," she tells me. "It's everything." The South American herbal tea isn't present inside the Rebase suite, but the space has every other wellness beverage you can think of, including packets of colostrum, collagen, and electrolytes. A nearby table contains several bottles of liquids in a symmetric pattern, from coconut water to turmeric juice to kombucha. Carpenter holds up the shot of an energy drink, labeled Ketone-IQ. "I thought this said 'ketamine,'" she says. "I was like, whoa!"

It's an unusual move these days to release a new album while still touring behind the one before. But Carpenter is learning to do what she wants, and tune out the rest. "If I really wanted to, I could have stretched out *Short n' Sweet* much, much longer," she says. "But I'm at that point in my life where I'm like, 'Wait a second, there's no rules.' If I'm inspired to write and make something new, I would rather do that. Why would I wait three years just for the sake of waiting three years? It's all about what feels right. I'm learning to listen to that a lot more, instead of what is perceived as the right or wrong move."

"How the Fuck Did All That Happen?"

At least for right now, with the new album under wraps, she doesn't have to think about others' opinions. "I'm living in the glory of no one hearing it or knowing about it, and so I can not care," Carpenter says. "I can not give a fuck about it, because I'm just so excited."

It's our final round in the cold plunge, and it's a brutal one. We've decided to cap it at a minute, which feels like an eternity. "I'm really contemplating my life," Carpenter says. She peers over at me, her hair tucked away in a tortoise claw clip, and tries to distract herself. "Do you know any good pubs in London?"

anchild" kicks off with Carpenter uttering two words: a loaded "Oh, boy." It's slightly similar to the *Short n' Sweet* deluxe gem "Busy Woman," which opens with a playful "Oh, hey," only there's a message behind this particular intro. "It's literally like, 'Previously on,'" Carpenter explains. "It's been a second since we've said hi, so there is a sense of 'We're back in it.' It's a deep breath and an eye roll, and back into the story, which I think is …"

But before she can reveal the story, Carpenter stops herself. "I'm always thinking about life and my music like it's a movie," she says. "Which is such a 25-year-old thing to say." (She turned 26 on May 11.) "But I really never felt like more of a main character in a coming-of-age movie than when I listened to the song, and that's how I wanted the video to feel." Carpenter's songs are usually born out of two scenarios: intentional writing sessions or spontaneous bursts of creativity that could happen anywhere or anytime, where she crafts a song in a moment of catharsis. "Manchild" falls into the latter category. "That was one of those times, which is why it feels more special," she says. "If I'm not at the studio right now writing something, then I'm going to die." Carpenter sees songwriting as a way to freeze her feelings in time. "I need to make sense of what I'm feeling and what I'm going through, and put it down on paper."

She means that literally. While Carpenter uses the Notes app on her phone to write (like us civilians, she's currently running out of iCloud storage), she employs a notebook a friend gifted her. Titled "Pop Hits, Sabrina Carpenter," it's where she wrote most of *Short n' Sweet.* "I never thought I'd be that bitch writing it down on paper," she jokes.

Carpenter didn't consciously set out to make another album. After *Short n' Sweet* wrapped, she continued writing and working with Antonoff and Allen, with no expectations. She describes the process as slow and steady — they'd have to weed out several bad songs to find "one good one," but there was little frustration. Far from it, actually: Carpenter was absolutely psyched. "I've really just

ANGIE MARTOCCIO is a senior writer at *Rolling Stone*. She did the Rolling Stone Interview with Stevie Nicks in the December issue.

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been making things, excited about them, and then continuing forth," she says. "Not to be dramatic, but what can I do while my legs still work? I'm limber, let's use it. My brain is sharp, let's write. I try not to get sad about the fact that nothing lasts forever, but genuinely, it's such a beautiful time right now. I want to soak it up and keep making things while I'm feeling this way."

Carpenter is a student of pop, and when looking back at her favorite artists' discographies, from Parton to Linda Ronstadt, she made a crucial observation — one that informed her decision to follow up *Short n' Sweet* so quickly. "They would release a 10-song album every year," she says. "I'm like, 'When did we stop doing that?' Writers write, they make music, and they release music. I understand the beauty of disappearing. My last two albums both took two and a half years to make, and they needed to. I just think every project is different. It just has to feel right."

Most artists would buckle under the pressure of having to follow up an album that dream-come-true'd their whole lives, but it only fueled Carpenter to keep creating. The new album "wasn't written from a place of 'How do I one-up myself?' or 'How do I recreate something else?'" she says. "*Short n' Sweet* was this magical gift; it fed me, and it fed a lot of other people in the world. It felt true to me, and it felt authentic to a lot of other people. It's rare that those line up ever, let alone more than once. It unlocked my brain to know myself more and more."

Antonoff felt a new era started the minute "Manchild" was born, completed right before the new year, along with two other tracks they knocked out. "When I heard those three, that was the moment when I was like, 'Oh, my God.'" he says. "You could imagine the entire album from that point, because the songs had such an identity.

"I find a lot of this album to be some of the most honest work I've ever heard," he adds. "There's something really celebratory about it, but most of the lyrical content is about disappointment in relationships and all the different shapes it takes. I think it's a celebration of those who let you down."

> "I Don't Want to Get Cocky. I've Been Here 10 Years, but Also 10 Minutes."

n between cold plunges, we sit in the suite's wood-paneled sauna, as Carpenter plays music off a Bluetooth speaker: Sam Cooke's "Nothing Can Change This Love," Stevie Wonder's "My Cherie Amour," Joan Baez's cover of Bob Dylan's "It Ain't Me Babe," and Fleetwood Mac's "As Long as You Follow" (she's a Christine girl, citing the 1974 deep cut "Prove Your Love" as her favorite Mac song).

The Rebase employee, a lanky fellow named Rico, brings us a snowball infused with peppermint oil. "He's my king," Carpenter tells me as he exits. "I feel like he would take such good care of me in my life." Carpenter loves essential oils, and uses a particular blend of them (lavender, geranium, and chamomile) when she's on her period. "I'm literally going to get it today or tomorrow, which sucks," she says. "Playing shows when you're in your … do you know about the luteal phase?" she asks, casually referring to the post-ovulating, pre-menstruating portion of the cycle. "I'm very into the luteal phase right now. I've been like, 'Oh, that's why I'm ugly for 10 days out of the month.'"

Carpenter says her exes got her into cold plunging. "I really got introduced to this shit by boys that I've dated that I made fun of for doing it," she explains. She references the *Short n' Sweet* cut "Dumb & Poetic," in which she disses a wellness bro who ingests mushrooms, reads self-help books, and meditates. It's the one with the line about Leonard Cohen, which caused a stir online, and Carpenter, with the help of her sister and creative partner, Sarah, even includes a 1966 Cohen TV interview to screen when she performs the song on tour.

"It's very that, to be honest," she says of her foray into contrast therapy. "I would always make fun of it, being like, 'Oh, the cold shower isn't going to fix your mental health. You need to actually maybe see a therapist.' But then I tried it, and I was like, 'You know what? There's a little something to it.' Mentally, it's not getting my life together, but it's definitely helping my body heal, and it's helping me have a little bit more clarity and energy. Unfortunately, it's a cult, but I'm here for it." She adds: "I have a type, I guess."

As the Bee Gees' "Emotion" plays in the sauna, Carpenter mentions she rewatched *Saturday Night Fever* the other night. "My favorite fun fact I've learned is that [four] of their biggest hits were written for the movie," she says. "Isn't that insane? They just locked in so hard."

Sweating inside the chamber, as our eyes start to burn from the peppermint, we touch on the dark underbelly of *Saturday Night Fever* — that beneath the euphoric music and sweaty dance floors, there's a lot of cringeworthy scenes of rape, suicide, and racism. Also, teens openly having sex in vehicles. "They all just casually fucked in front of each other," Carpenter says. "I was like, 'Did people used to do that?' Because I was not alive, and now, oh, my God, privacy is everything. They're just hanging out in cars, fucking in front of their friends. If my friends were fucking in the corner, I would be so deeply offended, and scared. But it was such a different time."

When it comes to Seventies music, however, nothing comes close to how Carpenter feels about ABBA. She is such a superfan that she named her two British shorthair cats Benny and Björn, after Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, and she regularly covers the Swedish pop legends during the "slumber party" portion of her set. "It's such a kismet artist for the show," she says. "I don't know if there's any other artists in the world [who] make me so happy. They just understood how to make fun music without it feeling cheesy or corny. And even when it does, you're into it, because they just sell it."

The band's digital residency, ABBA Voyage, even inspired her outfits on the *Short n' Sweet* tour, particularly the hazy light-blue costume that Agnetha Fältskog wears. If this seems excessive to you, just know that Carpenter nearly went a step further in her fandom: "I almost did a glow-in-the-dark look, because they had light-up outfits in their show. And I was like, 'You know what? It's a lot easier to do this when you're a hologram.'"

Carpenter got to meet Ulvaeus in April, when she performed in Sweden and stopped by the ABBA museum. To her surprise, Ulvaeus personally gave her a tour. "She was a very kind and intelligent young woman," Ulvaeus tells me. "I could see that there were a lot of things going through her head while we were walking around there." Ulvaeus says his two favorite Carpenter songs are "Espresso" and "Nonsense," a cheeky highlight from 2022's *Emails I Can't Send* (Carpenter used to perform it with highly specific, often horny outros for each individual show). "The production is … *oomph*! It's up there," he says. "She sings so well, and the hooks are irresistible. It's true pop music."

Carpenter is grateful for the spawn of her idols. "Thank God for the nepo babies," Carpenter says. "Because they're fans of mine,

SABRINA CARPENTER

and I need to meet their parents." For Ulvaeus, it's his 16-year-old granddaughter, Edith. For Simon, it's his 30-year-old daughter, Lulu. And for Parton, it's her teenage nieces and nephews. "When they found out that I was going to do something with [Carpenter], oh Lord, I became a big shot," Parton says. "I was just Aunt Dolly till then."

When Carpenter was asked to open *SNL*'s 50th-anniversary special with Simon, at first she felt out of place. "I was like, 'Are you sure you know who I am? Are you asking the right person?'" she says. But Carpenter is getting more comfortable being around these legendary artists. "I actually feel like I know what I'm doing," she says. "Now, I'm not an expert. I always have more to learn. But I can stand next to people that I've idolized my whole life and know who I am, which is such a crazy thing to feel."

en minutes have passed inside the sauna. We have five more to go, but we're completely overwhelmed by the scent of peppermint. Our phones eventually overheat, causing the music to stop. "I'm going to start looking like a drowned rat in the next 30 seconds," she says. We decide to exit the chamber and end the round prematurely.

We leave the spa and hop into a black SUV with Carpenter's team. Carpenter's publicist tells her that earlier, her cab driver was asking who was playing the O2. When she told him it was Carpenter, he replied disapprovingly, "Oh, I know her."

Carpenter cracks up. "It's not the first time I've upset an old guy," she says.

She continues this line of thought, getting increasingly candid as we wind through the chilly streets of Marylebone. "I was always so sad because I have friends that have the cutest, sweetest grandpas in the world," she says. "Rest in peace, but mine were perverts and just not cute. Mine were the dirty old grandpas that loved to make a comment, you know what I mean?"

We land on Chiltern Street, and step into the quaint Monocle Cafe — where Carpenter orders a cup of green tea and tells a starstruck barista she loves her earrings — then briefly saunter inside a chic magazine shop. But our time is cut short after fans start noticing Carpenter on the street. She's deeply kind to them, initiating a photo for one and telling another, "You smell amazing!"

Having grown up a child actor, Carpenter is used to being spotted in public, but the attention multiplied by a thousand after *Short n' Sweet*. She often disguises herself by wearing a brown wig (a hat, she points out, shall not cover her blonde bombshell hair). "Now I gave you my fucking disguise," she says. "But it's fine, I'll get a new one."

These public interactions are often pleasant, but they can be rather scary, too. "I'm a genuinely chill person, I think. If someone treats me like a person, absolutely, I want to meet people. It's only when people get weird that I'm like, '*Ooooh,* and now I'm going to lock myself in my house for the time being.'"

Sarah and Carpenter's best friend, Paloma Sandoval, often worry about Carpenter's safety. They tell me about a recent day off while on tour in the U.K., when they took her to Urban Outfitters. Even with her wig, a hat, a scarf around her face, and a massive coat, eagle-eyed fans still spotted Carpenter. "It's so hard to disguise her, because she has such prominent eyebrows," Sarah notes.

In some ways, Carpenter has been preparing for this moment her whole life. She was born in 1999 in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, the youngest of four girls (her half sister, Cayla, is the oldest, followed by Shannon, Sarah, and Sabrina). Her mom, Elizabeth, introduced Carpenter to vocal powerhouses like Etta James, Patsy Cline, Whitney Houston, and Aretha Franklin, while her dad, David, introduced her to classic rock: Queen, the Beatles, and a whole lot of Rush. "'The Trees' is the longest song I've ever heard," she jokes of the Canadian prog band. "I heard it my whole childhood."

Carpenter's parents' wedding song was, fittingly, the Carpenters' "We've Only Just Begun." "I'm so honored when people are like, 'Are you related?'" Carpenter says. "I wish I was. That would make so much sense as to why I sing, because my mom, with all due respect, she's a chiropractor and should never sing. Same with my father. So I don't know where it came from."

For Sarah, Sabrina's music was the soundtrack to her childhood. Sarah would accompany her sister to singing lessons and hear her parents blast her YouTube videos around the house. "She's not lying," Carpenter says. "It's unfortunate." You can find these videos online, featuring an adorable Carpenter, around 10 years old, belting the hell out of James' "At Last," Sinéad O'Connor's "Nothing Compares 2 U," and hits by Taylor Swift, Christina Aguilera, and Adele. There's even a cover of Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child O' Mine," in which she impersonates a mini Axl Rose, down to the headband — childhood memories indeed.

> "Whenever I Was Sick or in Pain, Once I Got Onstage, All of [It] Went Away."

There's a moment from this time that sticks with Sarah, when Carpenter had a nasty cold and was slated to perform at a local festival. "She just couldn't get over this cold, and she couldn't sing," she remembers. "But once she hit that stage, she sang like nobody's ever sung before. From that moment, it just struck me that this is what she's meant to do. That's where she belongs." Carpenter says the memory sticks with her, too. "I always found that when I was sick or when I was in a lot of pain, once I got onstage, all of [it] went away," she says. "I was just like, 'That's such a cool little trick that I can do.' It's such a cool little superpower."

Even back in those days, Carpenter was determined to make music her career. "I was like, 'This is my unpaid job. I need to do this every week. I need to continue to get better,' which is so weird for a kid to think that way," she says. "It wasn't like I had connections or the information on how to do that. Neither did my parents. We definitely made mistakes. I wouldn't trade that for the world, though. It brought me thicker skin, and I can be a little bit more savvy when people are trying to manipulate me. Sad, but it's true. It's part of growing up in any field, especially as a young woman."

When Carpenter was 12, she signed a deal with Disney's Hollywood Records, and a year later, she got the role on *Girl Meets World* as sidekick Maya Hart and moved to L.A. with her mom. Carpenter got other acting parts — including episodes of *Orange Is the New Black* and *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* — but her role in the three-season *Boy Meets World* spinoff showcased her comedic chops and earned her a fan base. Does she ever revisit it? "Against my will," she says. "It's going to be very weird and trippy to look back on it when I'm much older. But for now, I just shiver at the outfits."

Carpenter takes a similar stance on her early music. "If you ever listen to my old albums … which, don't," she says. But she points out that even back then, her pop albums dabbled in various genres — folk, country, R&B, and even Eighties. "What I was really trying to do is what I'm doing right now,

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COVER STORY

and what I think I accomplished with *Short n' Sweet,*" she says.

While critics loved the "genre hopping" of *Short n' Sweet*, what was fascinating was how cohesive Carpenter made it feel. According to Antonoff, that's largely due to Carpenter just being herself. "When your personality is that strong, genre opens up," he says. "Genre opens up when it's not the most important part of what you do. When we're working together, it's a secondary thought. It's something to play with. Something leans a bit into a genre we didn't expect, which happens many times on this [new] album. If anything, it just causes some smiles in the room."

Carpenter is extremely self-aware, particularly when it comes to her sense of humor. She gives deep, eloquent responses to questions about her sarcasm — partly because she's asked about it so often, but also because she knows herself better than she ever has. Since she was a teenager, she's viewed humor as her sharpest tool in the shed — a device to say exactly what she means.

"Anytime I didn't really want to be nice and please people, I could use sarcasm as a tactic of being transparent, and I didn't come across as rude or bitchy or hard to work with," she says. "This opens a whole other conversation [about] how women have to reshape their dialogue and overall intentions in order to make sure they're not coming off a certain way. When in reality, I've started to realize it doesn't make you a bad person to be assertive, or know what you want."

Jokes, Carpenter also realizes, help soften the blow and prevent her from hurting people — a strategy that also shows up in her music. "When I'm writing, it's so much harder for me to say something that doesn't have a little bit of a wink to it, because that is just the way that I speak," she says. "It's the way that I communicate with my friends, my family, and with lovers. There isn't an evil bone in me. So if I'm having a bad day, the joke makes it a little less bitchy." (Like all of us, she has bouts of anxiety and stress, a mood she dubs "Bitchy Brina.")

Carpenter knew "Manchild" would create a lot of online discourse, with sleuths desperate to figure out who she's singing about (she also humorously calls out said man's mom).

> "I've Tried Being Brunette and It Didn't Look Good, So This Is What It Is."

Many assume it's about Carpenter's ex, actor Barry Keoghan; he appeared in her video for "Please Please Please," another song fans think is about their relationship.

Even now, several months after tabloids ran stories that they broke up, outlets are still posting relationship timelines about the couple. Carpenter tries not to read them — she's mostly "immune and numb" to online gossip, she says. "When you get down the little rabbit hole is truly when people start commenting on you as a person or you physically," she says. "All of those things that you're already thinking on a day-to-day basis. You don't need a stranger from Arkansas to remind you."

But Carpenter sometimes can't help but notice just how inaccurate a lot of articles are, particularly the timelines. "You're like, 'That didn't happen then. That did happen then. You're missing a few key details there,'" she says. "People underestimate how tricky it is to navigate being a young woman, having relationships, and then having a bunch of strangers have opinions on them. Because surely, all of these people that are commenting, if they had the same microscope on their personal lives, I don't think they'd be as eloquently spoken as me. I know it's a tale as old as time. It's just unfortunate that it's still a tale."

I ask Carpenter if she's single now. "Am I doing the single thing right now?" she asks. "I'm doing the 25-year-old thing right now, whatever that means." The internet has been obsessed with Carpenter's love life since 2021, when a little heartbreak power ballad called "Drivers License" arrived that January. Olivia Rodrigo, another former Disney star, sang "You're probably with that blonde girl," and all of our computers blew up in flames. Your grandmother probably heard about a certain teenage love triangle — involving Rodrigo, her *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* co-star Joshua Bassett, and Carpenter, who was made the villain.

Carpenter released "Skin," which many suspected was in response to the drama ("Maybe blonde was the only rhyme," she sang). On the *Emails I Can't Send* ballad "Because I Liked a Boy," she laid out the destruction in plain view: "Now I'm a homewrecker, I'm a slut/I got death threats filling up semi-trucks."

If this all feels like a long time ago to you, it feels like a lifetime ago to Carpenter. But I'm not interested in talking about those events. I'm more interested in finding out if her restless work ethic is maybe — perhaps unconsciously — fueled by her desire to shed the "blonde girl" accusation, once and for all.

"That era was one of the most pivotal moments of my life for so many reasons," she says. "I didn't really intentionally do that. All I knew was that it wasn't going to stop me from doing what I loved, ever. That's kind of how I've always felt. Sometimes, it's about how you are able to be resilient. What that era taught me was to just trust myself, and trust that everything is going to work out the way it's supposed to, and trust that relationships are put into your life for a reason. You might not see that in the moment, but you see it later." I ask Carpenter how often she thinks about this era, and she pauses before responding with a Don Draper-like deadpan: "I don't think about it, ever."

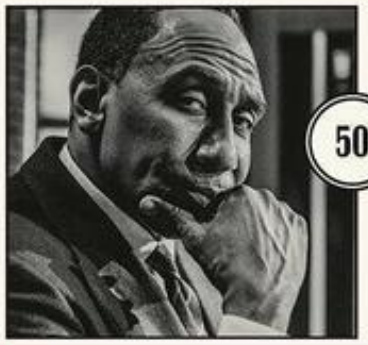
Naturally, she caps off this exchange with a classic Carpenter quip: "I've tried being brunette, and it didn't look good on me, so this is what it is."

In fact, despite what the song says, Carpenter is very bad at vacationing. Her give-a-fucks are normally with her at home, or when she's busy working out three or four days a week, using the fitness platform the Sculpt Society. But she finally took a vacation in late March, when she had a brief break from touring, and went to Lake Como with her friends, band, and dancers. Her ears kept popping from the elevation, but it was worth it. "We played running charades and drank Limoncello spritzes for two days," she says. "I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, this is actually really nice. This restored me.' Maybe I need that again. That's my goal this year. I feel like I've never had an issue working hard, so now I have to prioritize not being terrible at vacationing."

I meet Carpenter again in early May, at the Italian restaurant Palma in New York's Greenwich Village (it's on Cornelia Street, made famous thanks to her friend Taylor Swift). She arrives in a bubblegum-pink set, with white sandals and a matching white shoulder purse, her blond hair in another claw clip. She freezes when she sees me, pointing to my kelly-green outfit and my hair that's also in a clip. "Fuck!" she says. "We look like *Wicked!*"

Carpenter takes a seat in the private kitchen, a diamond ring in the shape of her initials on her left hand, and a ring with an empty locket on her right. She has rosy lip liner on, and prescription cat eyeglasses that make her look like a Sixties secretary. The wooden table is laden with glass vases of pink

STYLING ASSISTANTS: SARA JAMESON, MAYA SAUDER, CHRISTIN SHERRARD, LEINEA MUELLER, BROOKE FIGLER, EMILY ESSEN, AND LAUREN GARCIA. PAGES 34-35, 47: OUTFIT FROM VICTORIA'S SECRET ARCHIVES. PAGE 38: SHAWL BY BUCI NEW YORK. BOOTS BY CHANEL. PAGE 41: DRESS BY MCQUEEN. EARRINGS BY BROOKLYN CHARM. PAGES 42-43: TOP FROM VERSACE ARCHIVE. SHOES BY ELLIE SHOES. EARRINGS BY DAUPHINETTE. PAGE 44: TOP: RABANNE. COURTESY OF ALBRIGHT FASHION LIBRARY. SHOES: FENDI. COURTESY OF THE REALREAL.



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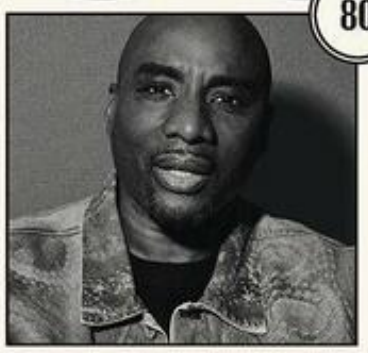

CHARLAN

THA GOD

A. SMITH

From the Capitol to Manhattan, from a Tennessee horse farm to Hollywood, a special lineup to celebrate six decades of the RS Interview

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In-Depth Conversations With the People You Want to Hear From

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

STEPHEN A. SMITH

JOURNALIST & COMMENTATOR

'Respect Is What I Earn'

It's a hot-as-fuck Los Angeles morning. Near 80 degrees at 8 a.m., and Stephen A. Smith is having half of a lightly jellied bagel. We're on the border of a big-ass private park that abuts a 40-story black glass building rumored to house or have housed LeBron James' business partner Maverick Carter, Demi Lovato, Addison Rae, Dixie D'Amelio, and sundry Qatari royalty. The structure feels too tall for the quaky City of Angels, and one can only hope it stays as unshakable as its most garrulous current resident, Stephen A. Smith. ● Because sports media has belatedly begun a messy process of reinvention, and Smith, 57, is flourishing. The Bronx-born journalist who made his

By DANYEL SMITH • Photographs by SACHA LECCA

GAME FACE
Smith at his studio in Jersey City, New Jersey

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

bones covering the Philadelphia 76ers' radical Allen Iverson era recently signed a five-year, $100 million contract with ESPN, making him the network's highest-paid on-air personality not tied to a licensing deal. Last year, *First Take,* the Monday-through-Friday talk show he hosts, led ESPN's studio shows with 21 consecutive months of year-over-year audience growth; so far this year, it maintains daily audiences of 450,000 to nearly 670,000 viewers and is trending upward. Salary-wise, the deal places Smith ahead of nighttime titans like Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Kimmel, and Jimmy Fallon. He's on ESPN air more than any other talent, and yet Smith wants a sports broadcaster's holy grail: Last September, he said he'd love to be on *Monday Night Football*.

Smith is engineered for this moment. On camera, his smile goes from Cheshire Cat to Mona Lisa to Grinch. His insight, grouchiness, intensity, and loudness lure, as he's labeled everything from "most annoying" to "just noise" to "a left-wing shill" to a "megaphone for MAGA." And whether you think he's a mascot for the demise of sports journalism or the epitome of bootstrappy brilliance, Smith has been so vocal about national politics, his name has come up as a possible presidential candidate.

But there's more. Since 2016, Smith has had a recurring role as a surveillance expert on ABC's *General Hospital*. He recently appeared as a sports agent on *Law & Order*. He shows up talking to Sean Hannity on Fox News. His 2023 memoir, *Straight Shooter,* is a *New York Times* bestseller. New media is on the rise, and younger broadcasters are coming into their own. But Stephen A. has the energy of one in the catbird seat.

"People are doing their podcasts, or they're reporting on stuff, or they're coming at Stephen A. and they're saying, '*Who is he? What does he know?*' They're forgetting my résumé," he says, his voice hoarse even as he was on his way, after our conversation, to tape *NBA Countdown*. "I've been doing this. I've been a journalist for 20 years before I ever came on *First Take*. That's why *First Take* can come on the air every day and I can do what I do with passion and fervor."

There's a quiet mania about people like Stephen A., who work both morning and late shifts, on the same days. Their tightly managed fatigue can't hide a vanity they have about the simple fact of experiencing more hours: living more life. This affectation can become so steadying a force that it morphs into their personality. That's why, in the blistering sun and brutal pollen in the private park, I had to press Stephen A. about who exactly Stephen Anthony Smith is. I think he almost told me.

How has sports fandom changed from when you were covering the 76ers in the Nineties and aughts?
Fans are more invested because sports gaming has entered the fray. There's a lot more at stake, because you're not just rooting, you're betting. And because you're betting, you become a bit more hostile. Social media has a profound impact as well. Everybody has a voice now. Or they think they do. And sometimes the people talking are the athletes themselves — clapping right back. Technology compels athletes, coaches, and teams to react, no matter how much they deny it.

Do you feel like the fandom around you is different these days? People either love Stephen A. or they hate Stephen A.
That's always been the case. Either you're for me or you're against me, but that's the way I like it. That's what I signed up for. I'm a trained journalist. You have people who are going to question your truth, or people who despise you for telling them what they know to be true. I've never been in this business to be liked. It's nice to be liked. To be loved. But it's not an expectation. Not something I'm entitled to. It's not something I care about when it comes to how I approach my job.

Does that carry over into your personal relationships?
I don't understand that question.

As you say, it's nice to be loved, to be liked. But it's not required.
I wouldn't say that. I've got a wonderful family. Two daughters. Four older sisters. Fifteen nieces and nephews. I've got friends that I grew up with in Hollis, Queens, in New York. I've got my buddies I went to Winston-Salem State University with. I got boys all over the country. There's no absence of love. It buffers me, and strengthens me professionally. I don't have any needs, professionally, other than to do my job. There's not this salivation for love, adoration—

From your audiences.
Right. Respect is what I earn, and I gotta wake up and earn that every single day. But affection, love, all of those goody-two-shoe feelings? No. That's not my profession. Not if you're about doing this right. Because there are going to be times where even the people that you've cultivated a relationship with, that you care about, that you wish the best for — you're gonna have to call them to the carpet.

I've seen you do it.
When necessary. It hurts to do it. But that's the job. I let anybody that does business with me understand, up front, that's who I'm going to be. Don't cultivate a relationship with me if your objective is to ensure that you divert me away from doing my job. If that's your goal, you're going to be disappointed.

What really were the odds of young Stephen Anthony becoming Stephen A.?
Oh, extreme. If I could add a word on top of extreme, I would. To get left back in the fourth grade, with a first-grade reading level. To have undiagnosed dyslexia that my mother and my sister ultimately discovered. To graduate from high school with honors — but from a vocational technical high school where I studied electrical installation and stuff. To go to Winston-Salem on a basketball scholarship, only to crack my kneecap in half my first year there, and never be the same—

I've heard you use that phrase before.
Which phrase?

***Cracked* your kneecap—**
Patella.

—in half.
Yes.

I've often thought you have good insight into injury. Is this why?
Yeah. Because it wasn't just the injury. It was the rehab. It was the absence of access to top-notch technology because it was a Division II school. I literally had to leave for a full semester, go home to New York for rehabilitation, because my mother's insurance would not pay for it if I stayed in North Carolina. The school didn't cover us like that.

When you went down there to try out, you hit a whole bunch of—
Seventeen. Seventeen three-pointers. I never did it again. It's a miracle that I didn't miss.

You know how difficult it is to shoot the ball from the three-point line and beyond, and make it.
Oh, man. It's very difficult. But one thing that I could do throughout my life was shoot the basketball.

And now?
I can go out to a court and play, but my knees are sore for a couple of weeks if I do that. With my schedule, it's just not worth it.

Right now, everybody seems to hate three-point shooting.
It's simple. A lot of guys can't shoot. But everybody's looking to jack up open three-point shots. It elevates the pace. It peels you away from the physicality of the game, the banging down the side, elbow swinging, and everything else. The combination of those things lends itself toward a more attractive brand of basketball. Plus, it's lethal: When somebody's knocking threes down on you, it demoralizes the opposition, because there's little to nothing you can do about it.

There was a time after you got let go from ESPN—
When I departed ESPN in 2009, I had nothing. I had no prospects.

No one called you for meetings?
Nobody. No one. I was unemployed from April of 2009 to February 2010. Living purely off savings. Then an old agent of mine helped me get a job at Fox Sports Radio. Then ESPN Radio in New York desperately wanted me back, and brought me back in February of 2011. I was restricted to a two-hour radio show in New York and then a two-hour radio show in L.A.

How'd you get back on television?
Skip Bayless was the star of *First Take*. He and I had always wanted to work together. We'd done a pilot for Fox, *Sports in Black and White*. They loved it, but at the 11th hour

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and 59th minute, Fox Sports pulled it. Fast-forward. It's 2012. [Media executive] Jamie Horowitz convinces ESPN to let me come on once a week with Skip on *First Take*. When I showed up, the ratings went through the roof. Horowitz and Bayless convinced ESPN — *Let's have him sitting across from Skip every day*.

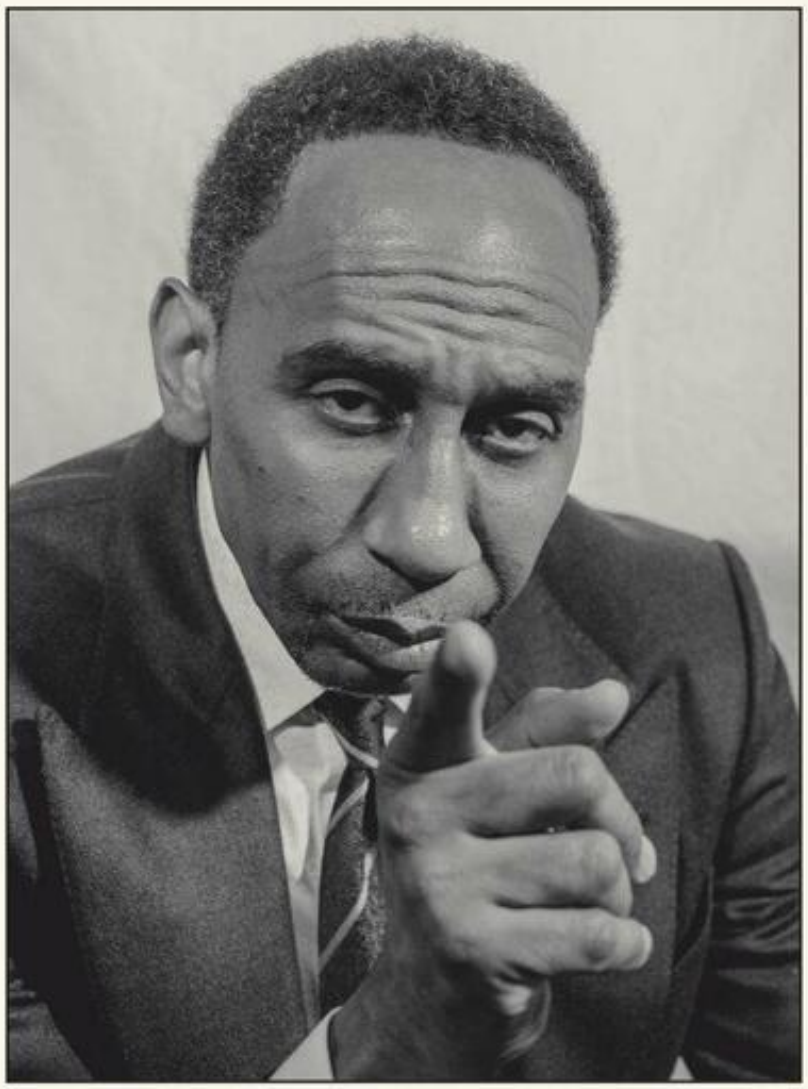
A lot of what I've heard about you is that Stephen A., one, is always playing chess, and two, Stephen A. keeps his enemies close.
I don't concern myself with my enemies, because most people ain't my friends. In terms of playing chess — that could be true, just not in this particular instance. When the Worldwide Leader [in Sports] lets you go, they usually don't bring you back. When they let me go, I was making $1.3 million a year. When they brought me back, they paid me $400,000 for two radio shows. And you had people in New York and L.A. getting that for one show. So I was grossly underpaid. I was humbled — which I happen to know was the goal of one of the leading executives there. And I learned a lot from it. I didn't feel that way at the time. But as life has gone on, I've been grateful for the experience. It's enabled me to be who and what I am.

Are we going to talk about you being ruthless?
I don't think I'm ruthless. Why would you say I'm ruthless?

Because not many get to a position such as yours without being ruthless — especially in sports.
Yeah. But that don't make me one of them.

If you weren't ruthless on your journey to the top, what were you?
I worked hard. Put my head down. I'm about the work. I'm not about the sizzle. I'm the guy that went to a White House Correspondents' Dinner through the back door. I didn't want to be on the red carpet. "Ruthless" implies that all you care about is your mission. Nothing else in life matters, other people's lives don't matter. I've never been that guy. Intentionally willing to hurt other people? I'm never that guy.

Ever.
Ever. Because I assure you, especially now, there's a whole lot of people I *can* hurt — who would deserve to be hurt. And I don't waste my time thinking about it. I'll leave them alone.



"I Don't Concern Myself With My Enemies, Because Most People Ain't My Friends."

Because?
Because that's not who I am. I'm not gonna put that on my soul. I'll let God take care of that. Some people deserve it. I won't mention their names, but it ain't hard to figure out. Some of the things that people … *wooooooo!* — things they say? And who they are? They ain't shit, and I know it. But, I'm not gonna waste energy trying to hurt them and do things wrong to them. I don't give a damn who you are, I want you to eat. I want you to have a roof over your head. I want you to be able to live your life.

I see people trying to knock you off your spot.
That comes with anybody that's on top. All they do is validate for me that I am on top — because what you worried about me for? I'm not trying to act robotic and inhuman, and tell you that if I read something or hear something that it doesn't bother me, in the moment. But the key words are "in the moment." Is this something that I carry with me on my shoulders every day, thinking about the negative things people say? I don't, because I wouldn't be able to do my job. I have alligator skin in that regard.

You and *First Take* have changed the way sports are covered.
When people say that, I take it with a grain of salt because, depending on who you are, you might feel it's a positive or you might feel it's a negative. My response would be a question: How exactly is it that I cover sports?

At the poles. There might not be as much nuance or old-school *Sports Illustrated*-style seriousness. It's "Who's the king? Who fell off?"
I pay very little attention to people who say that. Here's the reason why. So I might have a conversation about LeBron James or Michael Jordan being the GOAT.

You *might*?
Right. It may be several times. We are on *First Take* two hours a day, five days a week, and in my case, a minimum of 44 to 45 weeks a year. We're talking about 450 hours. I can assure you, that [James-versus-Jordan conversation] doesn't even equate to 10 percent of our content. People peel out what they want to peel out. It's just like when they were talking to me about Colin Kaepernick: "*When we gonna get back to sports? All we talk about is race. All we talk about is Black and white and police brutality.*" Really? So we had a two-hour show, and we talked about Colin Kaepernick for two segments. Well, there's 15 segments. What about the other 13?

Were you saying this in meetings?
No, no, no. Not in meetings. I said it on the air. Like, ain't nobody hiding. I'm the executive producer of *First Take*, so I'm not running. I'm paying attention. And I'm going, "Y'all really complaining? But then why are we number one for 13 years?" We've been number one since I arrived. Bayless has come and gone. Max Kellerman's come and gone. A potpourri of other people have come and gone. I've been there for 13 years. We've been

PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY FIACHRA MCALLISTER

"My Goal Is to Win."
Stephen A. Smith

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

number one for 13 years. We talk about everything. We talk football, basketball, we talk about issues.

You do.
OK? We're not a one-dimensional show. We pay attention to what the audience is paying attention to. We know what's trending. That's our job. And then we touch on the subjects they want us to touch on. How we touch on it is where I come in — because you're not gonna tell me how to speak. I have guests who think the opposite of me. And the theme could be surmised, over the last four or five years, as Stephen A. against the world. Because every analyst comes in to go against me. How did that happen, Danyel? Because I invited it.

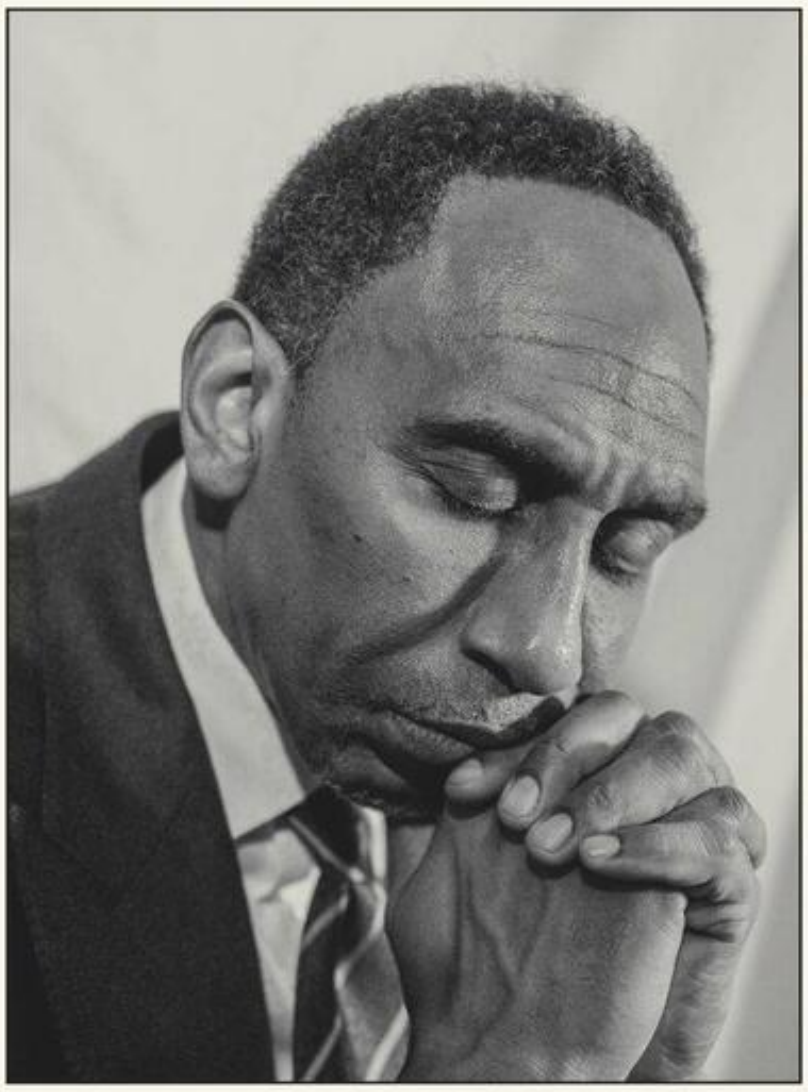
This is why I say chess, not checkers. You could go on all day and say Michael Jordan is forever king. But I believe you might say that even if you didn't believe it, because you know that that position gets clicks and eyes.
I do believe it. But here's the thing. Like anybody in today's generation, of course, clicks, ratings, etc., are what you covet in this business. But my authenticity is my brand. I mean what I say and I say what I mean. Unless I'm openly joking. When I'm serious, which is most of the time, you know I'm deadly serious. I'm not faking a take. I gotta live with that lie.

Are you being authentic when you talk about running for president?
Yes. Because I'm not talking about running for it. I said I'll leave the door open because elected officials, my pastor, my friends, and people in the streets have asked me. I have repeatedly stated I have no desire to be a politician. I was wrong to call them "professional beggars." That is disrespectful. But needing to curry favor, whether it's with other legislators, constituents, donors — I can't imagine ever wanting to live that life. Not to mention the fact that I would have to give up money that it took me a long, long, long time to earn. I just reached a contract extension with ESPN. I'm gonna pass up half that to run for office? I can't see it. But I care about the issues. I care about America. I care about what I see going on throughout the streets of America, and I do want to be a major player in terms of having a voice and influence with regard to the people that we select to run our country. In my perfect world, I'd be pushing candidates forward for America to look at as opposed to trying to push myself forward.

Is that where Three Americans, the live event you did in New York in March with Bill O'Reilly and Chris Cuomo, came from?
That came from O'Reilly. I was on the air with him and Cuomo, who has become a friend. He's never pushed me to be a politician, but he's like, "Look, you need to do more of this. Your voice is needed." And when O'Reilly came on the air and started debating back and forth with me, and folks saw the dynamic, O'Reilly was like, "This is something we should do."

Where are you on the political spectrum, in relation to them?
Chris is left. No matter what O'Reilly says about himself being an independent, he's right all the way. The Cuomo family is historically center-left, which is how I would describe myself. But I'm even more of a centrist than they are. I'm really right down the middle. There are times where I completely agree with what the Republicans are doing, and there are times that I completely agree with what the Democrats are doing, and there are times that I'm diametrically opposed to both.

"I'm a Never-Ending Process. I'm the Engine That Doesn't Cut Off."



When you say Republican, are you talking historic Republicans? Or Republicans as they exist today?
I'm talking about historical Republicans. Republicans today are at the mercy of Donald Trump. I don't even view Trump as a Republican. He caters to the GOP because that's his base, and that's what got him in office. That's why he did it. You have to remember, I knew Trump before he ran for president. We used to go to his events at his casinos in Atlantic City, used to see him at games all the time. Donald Trump primarily was known as a Democrat.

Right now, we have concerns about Harvard. About HBCUs. We've got concerns about his administration's willingness to eradicate Black history. I'm telling you right now, you get a bunch of Black power brokers together and sit at a table with Donald Trump and convince him that going against what he's purported is in his best interest, he'll do it. He doesn't care. That's always been him.

Is he a smart person?
He's not dumb. I can tell you that. He's very shrewd. He's a dealmaker. Which is why I get upset at people on the left: We sent you to Capitol Hill to legislate. Find a way to work with him. Stop just hating, hating, hating him. Find a way to give him something he wants so you can get what you want. That's your job. Anybody can sit up there and say, "I'm gonna oppose everything that Trump throws out there." That ain't working. Work is figuring out a way to serve your constituency. [As an example,] I sit up there and I get into something with LeBron James.

That viral moment at Crypto.com Arena in March at Lakers versus Knicks, where he approached you courtside and you two had words.

STEPHEN A. SMITH

And so I'm not gonna cover the Lakers? I'm not gonna talk about James now? What sense does that make? I have to cover the sport. He's a big part of the sport, which means I have to cover him, no matter what. Grown-ups understand that under the most hostile of circumstances, if you represent people, then it's about the people. It's not about you.

What is going on with you and LeBron James?
I have nothing to say about that. I don't like him, and he don't like me. He's one of the greatest players who's ever lived. I'm going to show him that respect, and I'm going to cover him objectively. When he does great, I'm gonna applaud. When he doesn't do great, I'm not gonna applaud. He hid behind his son [Los Angeles Laker Bronny James], tried to make something out of nothing, as if I was dogging his son, which I was not. The real issue was we don't like each other. And he used that as an excuse to confront me. We're never gonna like each other. It's not gonna stop me from doing my job. I don't have to like you to be fair to you.

Is it a power dynamic? Is it personal? Is there an old beef that lingers? A personality thing?
One could argue it's all of the above. Over the course of his 22 years in this league, I've had to cover things that have not made him very happy, and I don't care.

Do you think you're good to the women of ESPN?
The women of ESPN?

Journalists. You have a lot of women on your shows.
I do. They deserve it.

They do.
I don't think about it as being good to them. They've earned it. Monica McNutt, Andraya Carter, Chiney Ogwumike, Kimberley Martin, and of course my host, Molly Qerim. Mina Kimes. These are all ladies that contribute to the show. And they are nothing short of outstanding. What they've done for the industry, they deserve a lot of credit for, and they will always have my support.

You've said that there have been three times you feel like you made a misstep. One involved the Ray Rice intimate-partner violence situation, when the then-Ravens running back and his fiancée were arrested after video was released of him knocking her out cold in an Atlantic City elevator. I bring this up to say that your reputation with regard to how you may or may not view women has not always been super top-line.
Nobody's perfect. Everybody and their mother advises me, "Don't revisit it. It's a no-win situation." To me, that's cowardice. I know what I said. And what I did was utter the word "provoke." A former colleague at ESPN took it, ran with it, and it went ballistic on Twitter. The leadership at ESPN reacted to that. When the heat elevated, [they] said, "We have to suspend you." And that's a blemish on my career I do not believe I deserve. I've been consistent in that position. I'm a father of two daughters. I know what I've never condoned or excused. Unfortunately, we live in an immature society where people are not deducing right from wrong and contextualizing things properly.

When you were on television in the aftermath of your mom's death a few years ago, you did not seem like the same person to me. You didn't seem to care about what had happened in the previous night's games. You were prepared and professional. But I thought in those moments that the person I was witnessing might be Stephen Anthony as opposed to Stephen A.
I don't know. What I do know is I was like a zombie. That's not Stephen A. I was a zombie. Part of me had died. My mother is the greatest human being I've ever known. That I've ever loved. I mean, my daughters, obviously, but my mother is the reason I know there's a God, and why I believe in angels. I've never contemplated hell for two reasons. One, because I saw the hell she had to go through to take care of us. That look in her eye, that fatigue, that dire look of concern, wondering if anything that she did was gonna be enough to get us through — because Dad didn't help her. That was hell. But also, in seeing her go through it, she made sure that I never felt it.

And when she left, I had to go to therapy. It was insisted upon by loved ones, by my pastor as well. I cried every day for two years. She's been gone now for eight years, June 1. Every day, I hear her as if she's still here. That used to sadden me. Now it makes me smile.

Talk to me about St. Thomas, where your family is from.
That's where my mother and father were born and raised. It's the islands, you know? I was very mad at my father years ago, because he had promised some local senate candidate I was going to campaign for him. There was no way in hell I was going to do that. That's the kind of person my father would be at times, and I didn't like that at all. I can't just go home now and see everybody like I once did. Sometimes you get to a certain place and the people around you swear you changed, when in fact it's them who changed, and as a result, you just try to keep your distance.

Your sports journalism beginnings were quite traditional.
I wrote, I covered the beat, then became an NBA columnist, and ultimately I became a general sports columnist. You didn't have a license to editorialize back in the day, before the advent of dot-coms and all of this other stuff. You had to climb charts to become a general sports columnist. In some people's eyes, [what I do is] performative, but it's only performative in terms of the energy I'm giving. Not the information I'm spewing. Because that I have been doing for 20 years prior to *First Take*.

So when people say that Stephen A. is purely performative—
They know better. Not only do I not agree with it, I know *they* don't. They're lying. To say that I'm just performative is to ignore my journalistic background. How would you possibly think that I'm just performing? How, with the stories that I've broken, and the interviews I've done?

I can tell you why.
You can tell me why, but you wouldn't be right.

I would be right. One reason is many people tend to minimize the work of Black journalists.
But that's what I just said. I didn't paint it with a broad brush like that. But it's like, if I'm loud and I'm going off about something, I'm angry. If a white dude does it, he's passionate. I accept it. All I'm trying to say is that if you're on TV, aren't you supposed to perform?

So when your head is on your pillow, and your alarm goes off and you open your eyes, and you're becoming conscious, who is that?
That person is on a mission to give my audience exactly what they expect and more, over the course of two hours each weekday morning. They expect to see something from Stephen A. that leaves an indelible mark, and I believe that is why I am who I am.

Who is the guy that wakes up *before* he becomes Stephen A. Who is Stephen Anthony Smith? Is he happy? Is he sad?
I'm not happy. I'm not sad. I'm a never-ending process. I'm the guy who refuses to stand still enough to smell the roses. I'm the guy that got left back. I'm the guy that got fired. I'm the guy that walks around with that memory, that mark of failure draping over me to the point where I'm determined to make sure it never repeats itself. When I agreed to my contract extension with ESPN, I went out afterward and had a nice dinner. Celebrated. And I woke up the next day plotting for five years from now, to make sure I validate that I'm worth every damn penny they're gonna pay me. I'm the engine that doesn't cut off.

I'm not saying it's a good thing. I wouldn't advise most people to do it. But it's who I am. I'm 57. I lost over 30 pounds. I recovered from being a nearly full-blown diabetic. I recovered from nearly getting killed by Covid, and I'm in the best health I've been in in a quarter-century because I'm in the gym six days a week. I'm on the treadmill and the Peloton. I'm lifting weights. I box. I'm in the cold plunge and the infrared sauna. I do whatever it takes, because my goal is to win. And even when I'm winning, I don't feel like I'm winning because that was yesterday. That's got nothing to do with today — I got more things to accomplish. It's hard to stop me because my attitude is they're all gunning for me, and it's just the way I like it. It fuels me. It doesn't shrink me. That's who I am every morning. Not at night, when I'm tired and it's time to get some sleep. But when I wake up? Yes, that is me.

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

ERIC CHURCH

SINGER & SONGWRITER

'I Enjoy the Antagonistic'

Eric Church has a story he wants to tell me. It's mid-May, a month since the country superstar first sat down for what will become his Rolling Stone Interview, and a lot has happened in that time. For one thing: Bruce Springsteen heard Church's new album, *Evangeline vs. the Machine,* an adventurous project that introduces orchestral and choral sounds to Church's rebellious brand of country music. ● Calling from London, where he's about to headline Royal Albert Hall, Church recounts a recent backstage visit with Springsteen in Manchester, England, just before he and the E Street Band kicked off their 2025 overseas tour.

By JOSEPH HUDAK • Photographs by DAVID MCCLISTER

FIGHTING THE MACHINE
Church in April

"He held out his hand, and goes, 'I just finished listening to your record again, and it's wonderful. It's really creative, but the biggest thing is, it's brave,'" says Church, whose 2011 hit "Springsteen" paid homage to the New Jersey legend. "He said, 'The arrangements are great and your producer did a great job, but that bravery only works if the songs are great. And the songs are great.'"

Church sighs, still savoring the moment. "When you put out a record that's like this, you're looking for things that steel you in that resolve," he says. "I walked out of there going, 'Whatever happens, happens at this point.'"

The North Carolina native is used to doing things on his own terms. In 2009, Church bucked Music Row etiquette by releasing the pot anthem "Smoke a Little Smoke." During the pandemic, he appeared on the cover of *Billboard* getting the Covid vaccine, a bold choice for a country artist during the vaccine culture wars of 2021. More recently, Church staged his own *Springsteen on Broadway*-inspired show at his Nashville bar, Chief's, playing 23 shows for intimate, phone-free audiences, armed with just a guitar and a knack for storytelling. The residency, moving and shockingly personal, was a smash success, and in the middle of it, Church attempted to bring its man-and-a-guitar aesthetic to a headlining performance at Stagecoach Festival in 2024. To some of the 70,000 watching, the stripped-down show was a masterful display of risk-taking. But those who came expecting hits like "Drink in My Hand" and instead received mostly covers and gospel traditionals were pissed.

Church talked about all of this and more over three conversations, the longest back in April at a horse ranch in Tennessee, where he was being photographed for this story. His tour bus was parked nearby, and he welcomed RS aboard the ride, tastefully decorated with posters for old shows he's played, for a deep-dive conversation about his life and career. In a hoodie advertising *Field & Stream,* the outdoors magazine he and friend Morgan Wallen bought last year, Church relaxed at the bus' table while popping Zyn nicotine pouches and drinking Bold Rock hard cider. "It's made in North Carolina," he notes proudly.

Zyn, huh? Tell me about that.
So, here's what happened. I did Dry-uary, and I was out fishing with some buddies. You're sitting there on a boat, which is miserable when everybody's drinking but you. And one of them had Zyn. I used to chew a long time ago. They're like, "They're tobacco-free," and they're making them sound healthy. "OK, I'll take one," and that was it. The next time I do Dry-uary, I'll probably get back on cocaine [*laughs*]. Give up something, pick up something.

The title of your new album is interesting. Who is Evangeline?
Creativity. And the Machine is the world that we live in now. Technology-wise, it can either choke out or round the edges off creativity. So, the best stuff, the most creative stuff, has to fight the hardest to find its way, and that's what this was. You can listen to this entire album, and if you learn nothing else from it, you learn it's wildly creative, versus a time where not much out there is.

Were you thinking of the Band with the album name and title track?
Oh, yeah, very much. You can tell that on the horn intro to "Evangeline." My favorite band is the Band. If you look at their career, they made some wildly creative stuff in a time where there was a lot of commercial stuff going on that didn't sound like that. There's a lot of similarities between what they did in their period of time and what this record is.

There's a lot of French horn on the album.
And flute. The way we did this record was different than normal, and that started getting informed from the Stagecoach show.

Let's talk about that. At Stagecoach in 2024, you played a one-man show with a gospel choir and did primarily covers. A lot of fans left. One guy next to me was shouting, "Play your own fucking songs!"
The hardest thing I've ever done is that Stagecoach show, because there's one guitar for about 70 minutes, and I ended up having to even play the kick drum. I had to be my own drummer, and I couldn't change guitars. So, the level of difficulty was high, but what I found was it was [the choir] that really saved my ass.

What was the goal with the performance?
I knew I wanted to do a one-of-a-kind show, and I knew maybe the worst place for the presentation would have been Stagecoach. But I also knew that it would have been the biggest megaphone, that there were going to be 30,000 TikTokers who were there to be seen. The show wasn't for them. If we did that [performance] as a one-off at [one of Church's usual] shows, people would have tore their clothes. It would have been a revival. But [at Stagecoach] I knew I was getting a casual thing where they're wanting to hear "Drink in My Hand," and they're wanting to hear what they want to hear. And I'm giving them none of that.

> "I Want Passion. It's the Middle Where Things Dry."

The response was like Dylan going electric. Was there a moment where you're realizing things are going south and you start to think, "God, what have I done?"
PBS did a documentary on the performance, and there's a point in time, maybe 30 minutes in, where you can see that I know and I smile.... There's a part of me, I can be antagonistic. I enjoy the antagonistic. So, when that started happening, I doubled down. I'll tell you this, I've never had more people reach out to me ... and I won't name them because of what it would mean ... but like Mount Rushmore artists that found my cell number, and in the days after, texted me: "Dude, that's one of the greatest things I've ever seen. And you're very ballsy." [*Laughs.*]

You didn't change course for *Evangeline vs. the Machine.* Instead, you brought in not only the choir, but horns and strings.
Oh, I knew it was right. After Stagecoach, I said, "This is perfect. That's what it needs to be." I want passion, that's all I want. I don't care if it's negative passion, because the negative passion in my career has always been matched on the other side by the positive passion. It's the middle where things dry.

Last year, you did 23 performances of your residency — just you, your guitar, and your stories, plus a surprise "flash choir" at the climax. What itch did the residency scratch for you?
I didn't know until the first show how it was going to go, but it became very therapeutic for me and the people in the room. I could tell them stories that I'd never told. There were a lot of things I hadn't talked about, and most of those songs have never been recorded. People felt like they were getting to see me on a couch in a therapy session.

The residency shows flipped the timeline of some major events in your life: the death of your brother, Brandon, in 2018 and the 2017 mass shooting at the Route 91 festival in Las Vegas, where you headlined. Why did you do that?
I did it for the pacing of the show. I play "Church Boys" for my brother, and then we went into "Johnny," with the choir, then [a cover of] "Take Me to the River." The choir stays. Once they come, they don't leave. And before that was a "A Man Who Was Gonna Die Young" [tied to a story about Church's 2017 surgery for a near-fatal blood clot]. We tried to make it work as a direct timeline, but it didn't feel right when the choir pops out and then they leave.

You've never talked about your brother's death. How do you navigate that grief today?
[*Pauses.*] Yes, it's been almost seven years. That's such a painful part. I don't know if a psychologist will tell you it's healthy, but I bury a lot of stuff, just kind of roll with it. Sure, it

ON THE FARM
Church at a horse ranch in Tennessee in April

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

comes out in other ways. I don't ever talk about my family, you know, like even my parents. It's just one of those life-changing, painful things that I don't know how to really process. So, I just kind of keep stacking days, you know?

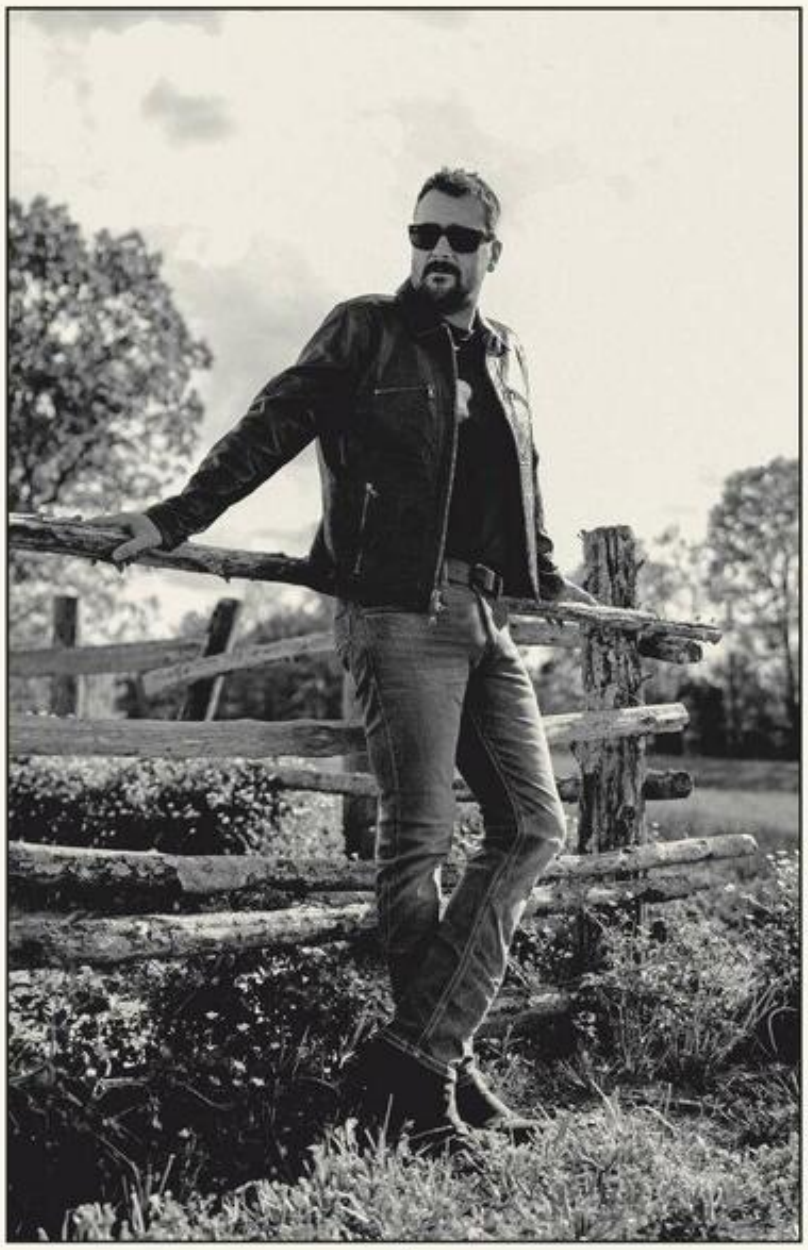
One of the more nervy times I've had in my life was when my parents came to that first [residency] show and didn't know I was gonna talk about him. They had not heard "Church Boys." My sister said after, "You've gotta give me a warning or something before that." I said, "I know…." I mean, I couldn't even sing at my brother's funeral. They wanted me to talk. I couldn't talk.

Do you think you'll ever record and release "Church Boys"?
I don't think I will. That's for that moment. That's for the people that were there.

Despite all of Morgan Wallen's missteps — the racial-slur video, the chair-throwing off the roof of your own bar — you've leaned into your friendship with him. Why are you so invested in Morgan?
I have a lot of acquaintances in the industry. I don't have a lot of people that are friends. And what I've always loved about Morgan, and I could say the same thing about Jelly Roll, is their unabashed honesty about their flaws and their humanity. When he screws up, sometimes just even privately, he owns it. There's that vulnerability of "I'm flawed and I'm sorry and I screwed up." There's something about that that is wholesome.

I say this to everyone [about Morgan]: I know the guy. And once you know the guy, it's a lot easier to be able to know the heart of that guy and to know where his moral compass is. And he's got a great one…. I remember when things took off for [me], and it's nowhere near the way it took off for him, but that's a really weird time. It can be really hard to deal with. We talked about a lot of that, and the shortest answer is, I would trust him with my kids.

Kris Kristofferson, a North Star for you, died last year. What did you learn from him?
There's a lot, because we spent some time together. As an artist, I learned how important the poetry is to the musical element, the craft. I don't think Kris Kristofferson ever



in his life sat down and wrote a song going, "I think this is a hit song." It was so poetic and so eloquent and so thoughtful and so unique. And as far as the man goes, there was such a humbleness when I was around Kris that I think would be hard for me if I was Kris Kristofferson.

You think you would know that you were Kris Kristofferson?
I'm positive I would know I was Kris Kristofferson. There's that famous story about Sinéad O'Connor [being booed at a 1992 concert after tearing up a picture of the Pope] when he walked onstage and said, "Don't let the bastards get you down." That compassion for another human being was something he always expressed.

The first time I met him, I was on the road, and I was in Illinois playing some crappy place, and we were driving home that night. It was 2015. My wife called and said, "What time you getting in? Because Kris and Lisa are going to be here." And she said it so casual. I went, "Who's Kris and Lisa?" She said, "The Kristoffersons. I reached out to Lisa and I know what Kris means to you, and they want to come over for lunch." I said, "To our house?"

So I get home at 6 a.m., I'm watching the clock, nervous as hell. And they pull up and get out of the car. We sat there, my wife made us BLTs, and I said, "I know it's 11 on a Sunday, you want tea? Diet Coke?" And he didn't jump on that. So, I said, "You want a beer?" He goes, "I'll take a beer" and I got us each a Miller Lite. He gave me the line [from "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down"] when I got him a second one: "The beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad, so I had one more for dessert." I was sitting there like, "This is not happening."

I was with him in Maui a lot after that; we would go there and hang out. I learned a lot from the way he treated me, the way he treated other artists. And back to your other question, there's a lot of that when I think about Morgan. [Kristofferson] showed a great deal of guidance for fellow artists who have to go through the same things. He reached out and tried to help you through this stuff, and that was a really important lesson for me.

In 2006, you got fired from the Rascal Flatts tour for your sets going too long. Taylor Swift took your place as opener and the rest is history. She even sent you a thank-you note for getting fired. Do you ever marvel at the role you played in her career?
Yeah. It's one of those things where you look back at your career and go, "How did I end up in that moment in time?"

Have you run across Taylor since?
A couple times. She got sued for that "Shake It Off" song [by the songwriters behind 3LW's "Playas Gon' Play"] … and in her deposition, when [talking about the line] "players gonna play, haters gonna hate," she says, "The first time I heard that phrase was in Eric Church's song 'The Outsiders.'" She was saying she never heard it on the [original song], which is what they were suing her for. And two weeks later, I got served by the people that were suing her!

So, I sent her a text, and she responded. I was like, "Hey, thanks. Next time, let's just skip that part?" And she sent me a text: "I'm sorry. It's the truth though. That's when I first heard that phrase." It's since been settled. But I was like, "How did this even happen?"

Are your boys into Taylor? Do they know the story about her replacing you on the Flatts tour?
They're into Taylor. But we never really talked about that part. I'm sure they kind of know a baseline of it, but they don't know the whole story. One day they will.

What do you play them in the truck?
Anything that can improve their life musically. But that's not what they're listening to. They're listening to crap, as far as I could tell. But they do like Morgan, and going to school, I'll play a song that I did with Mo on his new album. It's at least a way for me to go, "Hey, I'm not as uncool as you

STYLING BY KATY ROBBINS. GROOMING BY ALEX WINGO. SHIRT BY ROBERT BARAKETT. JEANS BY DIESEL. SUNGLASSES BY RAY-BAN. BOOTS BY LUCCHESE. OPENING SPREAD: JACKET BY TOM FORD. PREVIOUS TWO PAGES: JACKET BY JOHN VARVATOS. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY DANIEL WILLIAMS.

ERIC CHURCH

think I am. But then I'm going to play Jefferson Airplane and we're going to have a conversation, OK?" [*Laughs.*]

What have you heard lately that moved you?
It's an older album, but Brandi Carlile's *Bear Creek*. That's an album — that's what I took from it. Three or four songs in, I'm going, "Wow, I should listen to this more."

Last fall, you played a benefit with Luke Combs to help victims of Hurricane Helene in North Carolina, especially near your hometown of Granite Falls. You're also rebuilding homes and communities after the flooding with your Blue Haven project. Why do you think that is your responsibility?
I could not fathom that there was not some type of mid- to long-term housing plan [or] government assistance, where we didn't just put trailers up but actually built homes. Never been done, ever. I'm going, "How is it we're America and it's never been done?"

Generally, both sides of the aisle agree that when a disaster happens, we should help the people that the disaster happened to, and we just can't fucking figure out how to do it. The problem has been brewing for many, many, many years, where you have the money come in and the people at the level that were affected don't get help.... And I think what has happened is they've lost trust in a lot of the politicians, and it swings back and forth.

I think what you're seeing now is a bomb blow up all the norms and the structures of all of that. And there's a reshaping here. There's some danger there with the reshaping, but that's the time we're in. I know why we're in the time we're in, but how it settles? I don't know. I had [a] FEMA director at the Concert for Carolina, and my wife, Katherine, goes, "Imagine I just lost my home. I'm coming to your FEMA office in Banner Elk, North Carolina. What happens?" He goes, "Well, we can give you $750 immediately. Then you have to fill out a form, and you go into the system to get your FEMA money." And I chimed in, "I just lost my house, I have kids, and you're saying to me, 'Here's $750'? What's the form?" And he goes, "There's a QR code." And I said, "They've not had Wi-Fi at all for seven days — ended up being a month — and you're telling them they have to get on a phone that they don't have access to?" He said, "Well, we have paper," and I said, "Guys, that would piss me off."

So when you talk about "Why is everything now so chaotic?" that's it. It's because it's been a system that continues to break. [We] continue to elect the people that continue to say they're going to change it; they don't change it. And what you're getting now is a real restructuring of all of that.

Just like with Kristofferson, you were close with Toby Keith, too. Who would you say you're more like politically?
Here's where I would turn this around on you. I think you would say that one was more politically one way than the other, that Kristofferson is more to the left and Toby's more to the right.

One might assume, yes.
But what I found in getting to know them is they were incredibly intelligent and tolerant. Like, we talked about the Sinéad O'Connor thing. If that had been the other way, and it had been a far-right-wing person, Kris would have done the same thing. He was about the freedom of your thought and who you were. If he didn't agree with you, that didn't bother him.

Toby was way more nuanced [than you might think]. He had these songs, and a lot of it was "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue," and he was absolutely pro-military. But he wasn't an ideologue, and I'm not an ideologue. I have a problem with the political system where I believe things on both sides, but if I have to pick a party, it means that I can't believe some of those things. If I'm a Republican or I'm a Democrat, I have to be all Republican or all Democrat, and there's no way those guys and girls believe that. There's no fucking way. So, the problem I have there is you have to pick a side and have to say the other side's wrong because you're under that flag. That's total bullshit.

Would it be accurate to say you're an independent?
I hate "independent," because it sounds like I can't make up my mind. I bristle at that. But if you look at how broad these issues and topics are, I think there's a small percentage of Americans that truly believe in 100 percent of a party's platform. Most Americans go back and forth. I change my mind all the damn time.

You were at Bruce Springsteen's Manchester show in England, where he lit into the Trump administration as "incompetent and treasonous." How did it feel watching that?
I was side stage when that was going on, and frankly, I couldn't hear very well. We ended up going out in the pit later, [and] I saw some of it after the fact.

But Bruce, he's earned the right to say and do what he wants. It could have been about hunger, it could have been apartheid. I respect the hell out of somebody having the balls to do something like that. If you're Bruce Springsteen, at 75 years old, if that's what floats your boat, then you should do that. I was just ready to hear "Chimes of Freedom."

> "I See a Lot of Homogenization in Country Music."

Do you think country music itself is moving one way or the other in response to the current moment in the U.S.? I mean politically.
God, you're probably asking the wrong guy. Culturally, yes. I think it's pretty clear the country has moved to the right. Now, how that ends up translating musically is what I love. What are people gonna write about? Go back to the best music ever made, and one of the tips of the spear was the Vietnam War. That may be the greatest era of rock and country and folk.

We've talked about this before — this shit [politics] bores me to death. It's mind-numbing, because we're just going to flip it back, and it's going to go the other way, and then it's going to come back. Like a ping-pong ball. But what does interest me is what happens musically. In country music, it's going to be very interesting. I'm actually excited about that part of it — what music will come out, either in protest or in support.

Let's talk about something you'd like to see change in country music. What's the one thing you'd fix in the genre if you could?
I would love to have the quality of artists that are willing — and are allowed — to take some chances creatively. You get a lot more of that in the Americana world. I think that's why you have Zach Bryan and Tyler Childers and Sturgill [Simpson]; these guys were able to do things artistically because they can, and you see the demand for it. You can see it at the concert level, at the ticket level. And I just don't see a lot of that in country music. I see a lot of homogenization.

Why is that? Fear?
I think a lot of it is fear. I talk to a young artist and tell them the song that is going to be the most beneficial to their career is the song the label and radio is going to have the hardest time with. The stuff that they can make easy is probably the stuff that [sounds] like everybody else, but you're never going to differentiate yourself.

You're 48 now. What does the Chief look like at 50?
Well, I hope he's here at 50, let's start there. But "more thoughtful" is the word I would use. I'm way more thoughtful about my place in country music, the importance of country music, the importance of the future of country music, and the importance of making sure that everybody understands who came before you. I don't think 15 years ago I would have said the same thing, because I was very brash and "I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do, fuck y'all." But you've got to evolve. There's a lot of artists that do not, and the record they make today is the record they made 10 years ago.

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

CONGRESSWOMAN, NEW YORK

'The People Will Show Me the Way'

It's an early May afternoon in Washington, D.C., and as a group of demonstrators gather outside of the Capitol protesting cuts to Medicaid, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is in her congressional office, excitedly pulling bright pink, blue, and yellow yarns out of her purse. ● "I am knitting a cardigan; I call it my Fruity Pebble sweater," says Ocasio-Cortez, holding the colorful jumble against her black dress. The congresswoman has recently started knitting as an alternative to doomscrolling. "This is a practice that forces me to slow down. In a moment like this, when there's so much chaos, it is designed to basically just wear our nervous system down raw, so

By LORENA O'NEIL • Photographs by THEA TRAFF

RISE UP
Ocasio-Cortez says, "We need people organizing in the streets."

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we are then overwhelmed, paralyzed, and have to accept whatever new development there is going on that day."

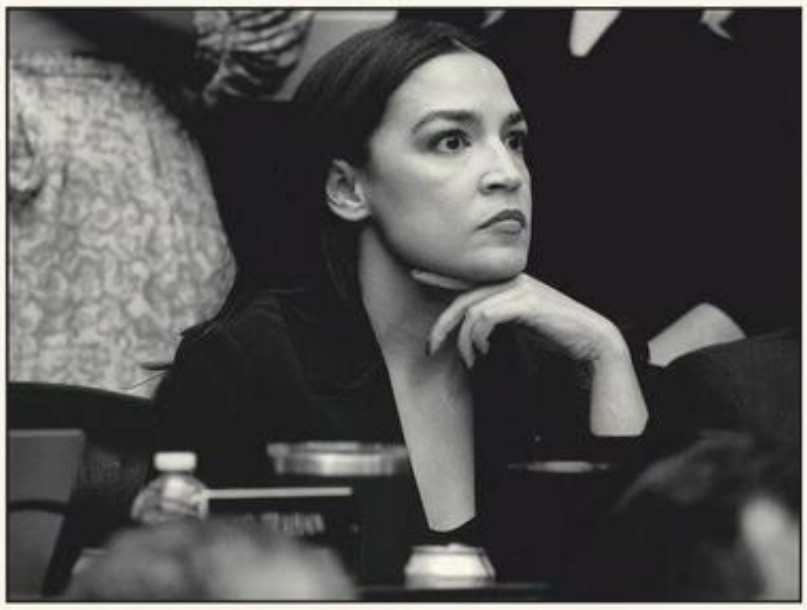
Ocasio-Cortez is no stranger to existing in chaos — she was thrust into the national spotlight in June 2018 when she upset House Democratic Caucus chair Joe Crowley in New York's 14th congressional district primary election. The attention has brought Ocasio-Cortez her fair share of both recognition and abuse, which we talked about when we met last year at a diner in Queens to discuss her legislation to end nonconsensual, sexually explicit deepfakes online. A lot has changed since then, especially politically. President Joe Biden withdrew from the 2024 race, Vice President Kamala Harris replaced him on the top of the ticket, and Donald Trump was elected for a second time.

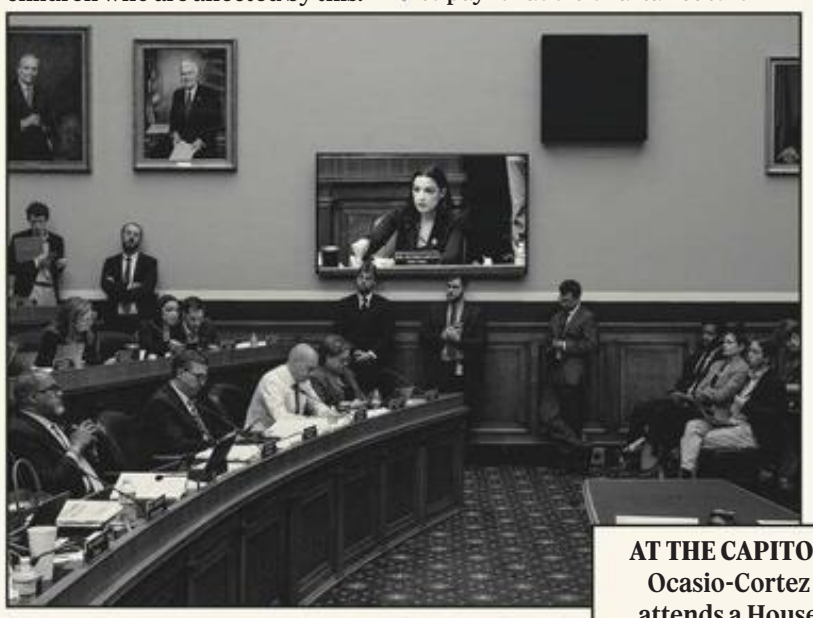
Trump's whirlwind first 100 days in office steadily chipped away at democracy as we know it, with free speech, due process, and the balance of power in the crosshairs. In that time, the Democratic Party has come under fire, accused of not being ready to meet the moment that is demanded of party leadership. But a notable exception to this narrative has been Ocasio-Cortez, whose "Fighting Oligarchy" rallies with Sen. Bernie Sanders have drawn tens of thousands of people in states like California, Utah, and Colorado.

Ocasio-Cortez brings up this "moment in history" throughout our conversation this spring. She talks about how this is a time when communities need to come together with courage rather than fear, how Democrats need to chart a path for a more inclusive future rather than constantly play defense, and how, above all, connectivity helps to avoid despair.

The congresswoman has a background of community organizing, and there's evidence of that throughout her D.C. space. A gallery wall in her office features posters of political calls to action — End Evictions! Climate Justice for All! — alongside photos of rallies and protests. "It's a way for me to bring home here," she says. As we speak, people line up outside of her office to write on the neon Post-it notes covering her door. There are handwritten messages from people from the U.S. and abroad, thanking her, telling her different versions of "never stop fighting" or, as it's written in Spanish, "nunca dejas de luchar."

"I feel very indebted to people for how powerfully people are choosing to show up, when everything about this moment would support tuning out," Ocasio-Cortez says. "We need Democrats that are willing to stand up and brawl and not be afraid to fight on these issues, and we need mass collectives of people organizing in the streets," she says. "I believe it's always been that combination that is able to stop the encroachment of authoritarianism and fascism."





AT THE CAPITOL Ocasio-Cortez attends a House committee hearing.

The last time we met, we talked about the Defiance Act, the bill you are co-sponsoring that would give survivors of sexually explicit deepfake AI abuse recourse to sue. Why is it more important now than ever?

We saw Trump's announcement at the State of the Union for the Take It Down Act [legislation requiring platforms to remove nonconsensual deepfake porn], which passed through. But what we are still missing is victim-centered legislation that actually gives victims the power and the ability to advocate for themselves and to fight for themselves and have their day in court, and that's what Defiance does. It gives people who have been subject to nonconsensual, deepfake pornography the civil right of action so that they can pursue justice for themselves and to seek damages for this kind of sexual abuse and harm. Defiance is tremendously important, because Take It Down centers other people, right? But Defiance is about helping the disproportionately, and overwhelmingly, women and children who are affected by this.

So much has changed in the world of AI even since last year. Since we last met, the outsize influence of tech billionaires in politics and on democracy itself has only grown. How does that affect the average person in America?

There is almost no area of our lives that has not been affected by this tech-billionaire class because they're buying elections. The balance of the Senate has been shifted because of the crypto lobby dumping millions of dollars into right-wing authoritarian candidates. And it's important to note that this money is not going into just issue-lobbying alone. This isn't about crypto billionaires trying to buy favors for the crypto industry. This is about crypto billionaires trying to install and support authoritarians and fascists, because they believe that if those fascists are personally close to them, then they can control far beyond the regulation of financial instruments. They think they can really start imposing this dystopian worldview that includes everything from the subjugation of women to democracy itself. And we're seeing this play out right now in the fight over Medicaid. Beyond the Senate, Elon Musk dumped hundreds of millions of dollars into trying to buy the U.S. presidential election, and he is trying to recoup that investment by getting one of the largest tax cuts for billionaires in American history — which the Republican Party is trying to pay for through massive cuts to Medicaid, for Americans with disabilities, health care for the poor. They're trying to cut Medicaid and SNAP food assistance to pay for additional tax cuts for Elon Musk and his industries, as well. And so it's really important for people to understand that this goes beyond tech. This is about the extreme concentration of money and power.

What did you think when you watched President Trump's inauguration and powerful tech CEOs Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and Sundar Pichai were sitting so close to him?

This is a moment in history personified. This is not just people buying favors. This is about who controls this country, and everyone else is just a formality, and that is the worldview that we are up against right now. This is the stakes of the present moment. And when Sen. Sanders and I talk about

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

oligarchy, this really is what this is. It is beyond partisan as well. It is concentrated. It is most concentrated in the Republican Party. But it's also the power that controls our politics writ large.

Your Fighting Oligarchy rallies with Sen. Sanders have drawn enormous crowds. What are you tapping into that other politicians haven't been able to access?

We are willing to name the problem in a way that has been challenging for [others] in the Democratic Party to confront. There's been this debate about "Do Americans understand oligarchy or not?" And I think that's a farce. I think that's a cover for the fact that a lot of Democrats don't want to talk about oligarchy. There's a lot of Democrats that are uncomfortable with the fact that Americans feel this way, that Americans see the extreme concentration of wealth, they recognize viscerally that it is untenable and, frankly, un-American. I think a lot of folks are uncomfortable squaring that with the fact that they're having dinner parties with the very people that are — and trying to court and curry favor with — the very individuals who hold power in a way that is unsustainable in this country. And so I think it's less about the fact that Americans don't understand oligarchy, and I think it's more about the fact that people in power are uncomfortable with the degree that Americans do actually see it.

Some people online joked that the Fighting Oligarchy name was the FO in "fuck around and find out." Was that intentional?

[*Laughs.*] I can't say that it was intentional, but I do think that hindsight is twenty-twenty. We should — I will unofficially adopt it as a part of the slogan, because we are in the "find out" part now for sure.

What does being on this tour with Sen. Sanders mean to you?

It means a lot to me, personally, and also in this moment. I would not be in Congress were it not for Sen. Sanders, in a very literal way and in a figurative way. I never, ever, ever thought that someone like me could be in politics, and it wasn't until Sen. Sanders ran [for president] in 2016 and showed that grassroots, small-dollar fundraising can actually help working people and unlikely candidates run for office. Even just from his literal example and how he structured his campaign; if it weren't for that, I wouldn't have ever even considered running for office. But then, of course, in a deeper and more meaningful way, his commitment, his values, that someone who shares my beliefs can make it in American politics, can even exist in American politics is — he is a huge inspiration for why I ran in the first place. He has continued to be a friend and provided a lot of guidance and counsel on my loneliest days here, and so to be able to do this with him is something I will cherish forever.

And also zooming out for the country, I think it's been tremendously important, too. It's not only that I'm doing this with Bernie, but that I'm doing this with every American who shows up. I had this moment on the rope line in Denver — when I first got elected, the crush of media and attention was very, very overwhelming. It was genuinely overnight. It's kind of funny, sometimes I talk to my colleagues, or sometimes I'll talk to other members, and they'll be like, "Yeah, like the waitressing thing that's just a story, right? Like you waitressed once, right? But what were you really doing?" But it's real.

I was literally bartending while I was running for office. And so it was an overnight, light-switch kind of situation. I wasn't steadily building a career or anything like that. And so overnight, I win this primary, and because of the nature of that victory, it was just this massive crush of media and attention. Of course, a lot of hate, but also a lot of support. But all of it was very overwhelming. I don't think I was able to really allow it to sink in, and, on a personal level, I wasn't really able to feel it all, because it was so overwhelming.

What happened at the rally in Denver?

On this tour and especially after all of these years, duking it out here in Congress, and being subject to a lot of … whatever, even within my own party — this tour has been very healing for me, personally. It is tens of thousands of people who, despite everything falling apart around us, still want to work for something. On a personal level, I'm more of a low-key person, and so sometimes [with] all the people, it can feel like a lot. But I was on this rope line in Denver, it really started to feel like — I am feeling transformed by this, and I feel like people are feeling transformed by this. It is a collective experience. And so to me, it's just to be able to do this, to do it with Bernie, to do it with people, it has been so powerful, and it has been the privilege of my life.

Switching to immigration, I've been reporting on U.S.-citizen children who are being illegally removed from the country, one of whom was a four-year-old boy in active treatment for metastatic cancer. He's the second U.S.-citizen child with cancer that President Trump has deported. How do you think the public should be responding to this?

Listen, I come from a background of organizing. If this president is breaking the Constitution and if he's starting to deport and force out U.S. citizens from this country, that, to me, is shut-it-down territory. We've seen collective action happen before, and mass civil resistance is one of the critical pieces that we have, and it requires both, right? We need Democrats that are willing to stand up and brawl and not be afraid to fight on these issues, and we need mass collectives of people organizing in the streets. I believe that it's always been that combination that is able to stop the encroachment of authoritarianism and fascism.

President Trump recently implied he's not sure he has to uphold the Constitution, and many of the actions of his administration involve denying people due process. Beyond kids, we've also seen this in the cases of people deported to El Salvador, including Bronx resident Merwil Gutiérrez, who you've spoken about. What do we risk when we don't have proper due process for everyone in the country, U.S. citizens or not?

"We Need Democrats That Are Willing to Stand Up and Brawl."

"When the President Attacks the Constitution, He Is Attacking Our Country."

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

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The Constitution is the only thing that really defines us as Americans. Despite the right wing's attempts, we are not a country that is ethnically defined. We are not a country that is defined by any one person, ideology, etc., except for the Constitution. What makes America *America* is enshrined in that document, our freedoms. People need to understand that when the president attacks the Constitution, he is attacking our country. We all swear an oath to the Constitution. As federally elected officials, we swear an oath to uphold, to defend, to protect the Constitution of the United States. First and foremost, if the president is in any way confused about his responsibility, he should resign. Any president should resign if they don't understand that, at the core, that's what his job is. Trump knows exactly what he's doing. He wants to transform the definition of what it means to be an American — from upholding the Constitution and our freedoms — to a pledge of loyalty to him. That is what a cult of personality and authoritarian regimes are all about.

While on the subject of deportations, I want to talk about the students who are losing their visas and being detained in detention centers because they've been outspoken on Palestine. What does this mean for free speech in America?

This has been our concern even before this moment. I have a history and a record of opposing a lot of the slush-fund dollars that Congress was approving into ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] and CBP [Customs and Border Protection], because I felt like we could see the risk of this moment happening. When you funnel tons of money and no strings and exert little to no oversight or authority into ICE and CBP, you can set up the breaking of the Constitution, using ICE and CBP as the mechanism for violating our civil and constitutional rights. And it's the same thing when it comes to Palestine.

In the United States, everyone can talk about free speech as much as they want. The right wing can, as they have been, play this victim card around free speech all they want. And it's not just Republicans. In both parties, everyone was talking about cancel-culture fears. Social repercussions for saying hurtful things [were] treated as though [they were] a constitutional crisis. When the fact of the matter is the most heavily policed speech in America, no matter who is in charge, has always been the advocacy and the recognition of the humanity of Palestinians.

For a very long time, this groundwork has been laid and enforced. This idea conflating that recognizing the human rights of Palestinians is somehow equal to antisemitism, those bricks and those dangerous foundations have been laid for a very long time, especially since Oct. 7, 2023. It should not come as a surprise when we also see organizations like AIPAC [pro-Israel lobbying group American Israel Public Affairs Committee] and the crypto lobby going after and attacking human rights advocates and trying to unseat those in Congress, conflating antisemitism with people who just want to see Palestinian kids have their human rights protected. It all lays groundwork for this moment, because this administration has seized on that predicate. They have seized on all of those pretenses that have been laid before and say, "OK, well, if you believe that recognizing the plight of Palestinians is antisemitic, then it shouldn't be that much more of a step further to revoke people's green cards, accuse them of terrorism, accuse them of working with Hamas," because that is some of the discourse that has been allowed in the Democratic Party as well.

You can take on that mantle, you can pretend that it's bipartisan, and what's important for people to understand is that that then becomes the predicate for attacking our Constitution. An authoritarian regime, or the Trump administration, is never going to use politically popular or overwhelmingly sympathetic targets to dismantle the Constitution. They are always going to use the people most maligned and most marginalized in order to attack and erode the rights of every American, precisely because they know that not everyone will come to their defense.

After the election, you reached out to people in your district who voted for you and also voted for Trump. What did you learn about these voters?

I know it's a hard pill for some people to swallow. But at the end of the day, if you are interested in the psychology of people who overlap between throwing a vote to Trump and throwing a vote to me on the same ballot, no matter what you think about it, those people believe he and I to be honest, to be direct. Honest about what we think, right? I say what I believe. They don't think I'm bullshitting them. They know that I'm fighting for them. And it's true, in terms of my relationship to these folks: You send me to Congress, and I'm going to fight for you, and I'm going to put your interests first. It's strength, too.

It's also [about] where people get their information. I tend to be in the places where sometimes Trump is in terms of where they get their news.

In national conversations, people see one thing, but at home, what people experience is my presence. I'm very present in New York. It's not unusual for me to be walking down the street in Jackson Heights or in the South Bronx or in Astoria, and people see me and they have eyes on me. Trump did that, too, in this last election — he had [hundreds of] rallies in the last cycle. It's something that I think sometimes gets overlooked.

> "I Say What I Believe. [Voters] Don't Think I'm Bullshitting."

Polling indicates that while President Trump's approval rating has fallen substantially, Democrats aren't necessarily gaining. What should the party's leaders be doing differently? And what can voters do to influence how Democratic leaders handle Trump?

It's sometimes less about party leadership and more about the party, because this is a party that selects its leaders. The Democratic Party selects its leaders, and its leaders act at the behest of the party members in the caucus. In a moment where we see Trump losing but you don't see Democrats gaining in that loss, first and foremost, it cuts directly against a lot of assumptions here about politics being zero-sum. Politics are not zero-sum.

And I think one of the things that people can see, if they want to see it, in November, is that this isn't just this binary spectrum where one person's gain is another person's loss and vice versa, and also moving to the quote-unquote right, or picking up moderates, doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to keep your base. We run real risks in collapsed turnout, and the trick is not necessarily always in choosing one or the other, but we actually need all of it in order to win. One of the struggles that the party has is in deciding what the party itself stands for and who it wants to be. In fact, one of the most uniting principles, which is economic populism and genuinely fighting the oligarchy in this country, is also a political third rail inside the beltway of Washington, D.C.

What do you mean by political third rail?

It's something that is tremendously popular with people, but a lot of our electoral system is based on appealing to the one percent.

So it's a political movement that's being missed because of how the electoral system works?

Right. If you depend on big money to win, it's hard to get in front of a crowd and talk about the problems with big money.

Trump says he's using tariffs to try and bring manufacturing back for the American worker. Is there any part of this idea that you support?

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

The way that they've gone about this tariff business is insane. The Biden administration used targeted tariffs. The existence and presence of tariffs, in and of itself, is not this explosive Chicken Little the-sky-is-falling kind of thing. Sometimes people have this blanket reaction, and it's like they have amnesia over the fact that President Biden did institute 100 percent tariffs on certain Chinese energy exports. So you can't look the other way when Biden does it and then act like every single tariff is bad when Trump does it. However, what Trump is doing is blowing a hole in not just the U.S. economy. The blanket nature of this — as though we're somehow going to start manufacturing mangoes in the United States of America — I mean, give me a fucking break.

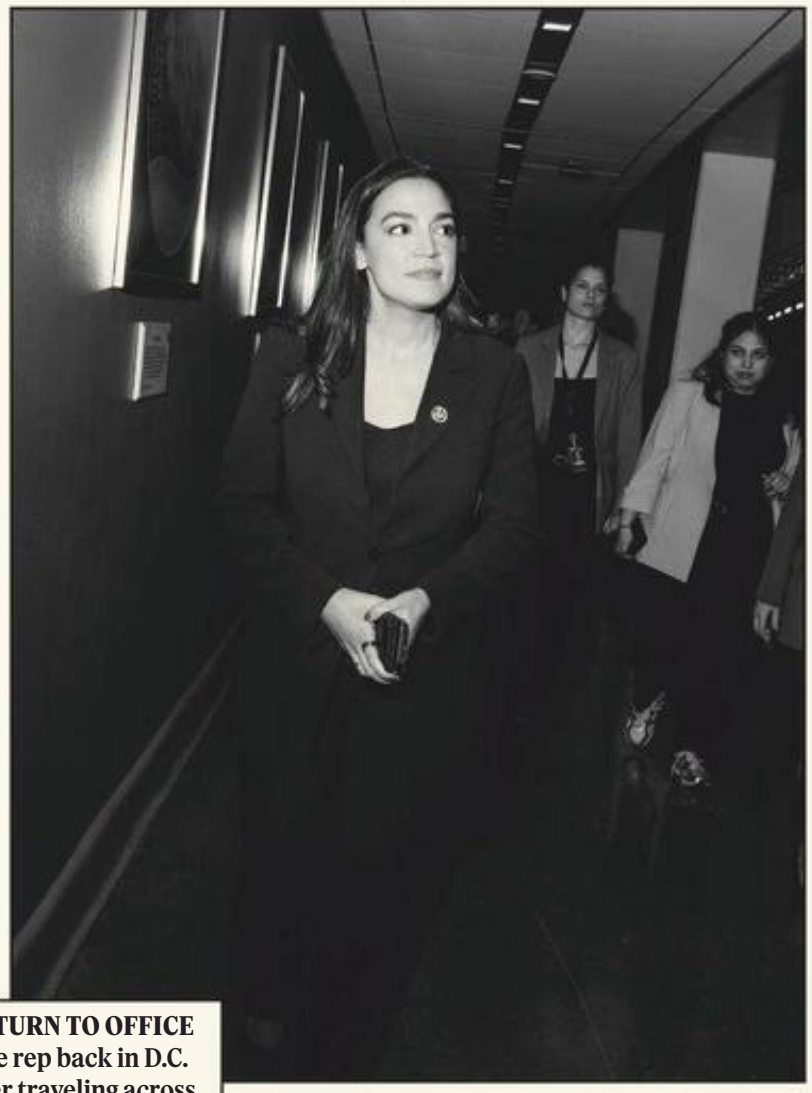
You have been fighting against Republican cuts to Medicaid. Can you talk about how these cuts will affect people?
Medicaid is one of the largest insurers in the United States of America. One in five people get their insurance in whole or part or in part from Medicaid, and that's before we even talk about Medicare.

If you buy your insurance off of a health exchange, even if you're buying a private health insurance plan off of an Obamacare or state exchange, you will be affected, because Medicaid expansion affects ACA coverage.

Medicaid expansion affects people with disabilities, people who are looking for work, whose job doesn't cover health insurance, whose job doesn't pay enough for them to have health insurance. Out of every 10 babies born today, four of [those births] will be covered by Medicaid.

We are talking about a massive devastation of our social safety net. And for all of this conversation that Republicans talk about with [Medicaid work requirements for] quote-unquote, able-bodied men — they are very literal in that — people with mental health issues, I think they would consider them able-bodied. We are talking about one of the biggest revocations of health insurance and health care in the United States of America. It is tremendously dangerous.

Why do you think Republicans are pushing for this? Who benefits from it?
The whole reason we're here is [because] they're talking about waste, fraud, and abuse. I've been sitting through a lot of these debates. The only time the Republicans brought up a number of alleged waste, fraud, and abuse is $50 billion. Even if you believe them, then why did they put $850 billion as the number for their cuts? Where's that other $800 billion coming from if you said the waste-fraud-abuse number was $50 billion? And the reason for that is because this is not a health-care-cut bill. This is a bill where they have an assignment — they are trying to give trillions of dollars in collective tax cuts to billionaires, and they have to pay for it. And so the thing that they have identified to pay for it is one of the largest areas of expenditures in the United States, which is health care.



RETURN TO OFFICE
The rep back in D.C. after traveling across the country for rallies

Elon Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency has made significant, broad sweeping cuts to federal agencies, and the destruction of the social safety net has been a long-term goal of Republicans. How can Democrats rebuild it after this assault has caused so much harm, and are you scared of what you're seeing happen to democracy?
When it comes to social safety net, I am very concerned, because one thing we see in terms of patterns is that Republicans will gut something, and then when Democrats are in the majority, we're not able to get the votes to bring it back at one hundred percent. For the last 30 years, we've experienced death by a thousand cuts — the slow erosion of our everyday quality of life.

I genuinely do believe that an important response to all of this stuff getting decimated is rethinking our social safety net entirely. Making it more inclusive, making the middle class not feel cut out from these kinds of supports, saying, instead of how do we just try to climb our way back to what was, what if we just expand Medicare? What if we either lower the age of Medicare to include everybody, let everyone buy into it, or if the party is not there yet, what if we lower the age of qualifying for Medicare to 50, or even lower? So that people can understand that we're not just constantly trying to stop bleeding, but that we actually have an ambitious vision for this country.

That kind of offense is the only thing that's going to get us back to the place that we need to be.

Do you listen to music or watch any TV shows to wind down?
I have had the Bad Bunny album on repeat. I love that he's bringing salsa back. Rauw Alejandro is doing that, too. I'm a big salsa person. It's such a nice outlet. I like it because the lyricism is so dramatic. Everyone's breaking up, everyone's got the love of their life. It's so funny.

As a Puerto Rican, the album is very cathartic, and it's very political. It speaks to a lot of what's happening to us and our people right now.

Did you see that this morning Bad Bunny announced that he's going on a world tour and he's not going anywhere in the United States, other than his residency in Puerto Rico?
We just don't have figures like that anymore. I think about the Civil Rights Movement, and I think about people like Harry Belafonte and all of these artists who really did risk everything, risk their careers and their popularity in order to support and take part in people's movements, and to use their art, a whole album about that. It's more rare now, or at least it feels that way; I wasn't around then. The pressures of the industry are to be as broad as possible. When you have someone who does something gutsy like that, first of all, people come through for it, and it's super compelling.

Speaking of tours, do you know what you want to do with the momentum from your Fighting Oligarchy rallies?
I think there are different ways of looking at politics. Some politicians look at voters and electorates and try to make predictions. I really do believe, even despite all of this, I really do believe in people. I believe in our collective conscience. So, I don't have any master plan, but I believe that the people will show me the way.

MAN OF REELS
Gunn at his office on the Warner Bros. lot in L.A.

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

JAMES GUNN

FILMMAKER & CO-HEAD OF DC STUDIOS

'I'm Less Afraid Now'

It's not hard to find James Gunn's office on the Warner Bros. lot. A huge, glowing Superman "S" symbol beckons from an entrance wall, visible through a glass door from yards away. Gunn, 58, is in his third year as co-CEO of the company's newly created DC Studios, sharing the title and office with Peter Safran, who handles the business side of the operation. Together, they're creating a new superhero universe around some very old characters, aiming to finally make Superman and friends (and family, and flying pet) truly competitive with the currently shaky Marvel Cinematic Universe. ● Gunn is a refugee from that universe, after writing and directing his final

By BRIAN HIATT • Photographs by DEVIN OKTAR YALKIN

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

MCU movie, 2022's *Guardians of the Galaxy 3. Superman,* due July 11, is the first feature film set in the new DCU, and arguably one of the highest-stakes movies ever made, though Gunn despises that framing. He's an unlikely studio exec, to say the least. He spent his early years trying every conceivable creative outlet: fronting bands, drawing alt-weekly comic strips, acting, performing monologues in dive bars. He also got a Columbia MFA and published a raw, early-aughts debut novel, *The Toy Collector,* finding a path to his true calling when Lloyd Kaufman, co-founder of famed B-movie purveyor Troma Entertainment, paid him $150 to write a screenplay for something called *Tromeo and Juliet.*

He was soon writing big-budget movies, from *Scooby-Doo* to *Dawn of the Dead,* and directing quirky films of his own, one of which caught Marvel's attention, landing him the first *Guardians of the Galaxy* in 2014. With that film, he made himself an instant A-plus-list director, forging a blockbuster from a deeply personal blend of left-field humor, visual dexterity, and aching empathy for the oddest of characters, all scored with the cosmos' greatest mixtape. After the second movie in 2017, right-wing trolls unearthed some of his edgy early tweets, and Marvel fired him. They soon changed their minds, but the temporary separation opened the door to his first DC film, *Suicide Squad,* and his current gig.

In a glass case in the hallway of his shared office, which once belonged to Frank Sinatra, is a full Superman costume, worn by the late Christopher Reeve; a Gene Hackman-worn Lex Luthor bathrobe is in its own case in the spa-size bathroom. Gunn sits on a couch with Superman and Aquaman action figures looming above him on a mantel. On the coffee table are various DC comics, among them one eyebrow-raising anomaly: a copy of the first Marvel-DC crossover project, 1976's *Superman vs. the Amazing Spider-Man: The Battle of the Century*.

***Supergirl,* which is out next year, is wrapping principal photography. How much were you on the set?**
Zero. Very little. I mean at the very beginning, but I've been pretty busy, as you might imagine. I was really involved at the script stage, but then [director] Craig [Gillespie] has just been such a great partner. He's just been doing his thing. You never know how something cuts together, but right now it looks amazing. It's really cool stuff.

That's no longer called *Supergirl: Woman of Tomorrow,* correct?
[*Pauses.*] I think it's just called *Supergirl.*

Your Superman movie was first called *Superman: Legacy,* and now it's just *Superman.*
Yeah. I'm always cutting. "Legacy" was really — we do something called a premortem. A premortem is you get together with your group that's doing the project. It's usually about a couple months before shooting, and you go, hypothetically, "If it's an epic disaster, what are the things that we're doing today that are going to cause it to be an epic disaster? Everyone here can speak freely." The things you find on other productions are the things that people are whispering. "Oh, God, I don't know why they cast that actor — he doesn't fit the role." Or, "The production designer's never on time." One of the things I brought up was, it was called *Superman: Legacy.* Even though I was the one that gave it that title, I just wasn't sure. First of all, I'm sick of the superhero title, colon, other-name thing. And then also it seemed to be looking back when we're looking forward, even though it does have to do with legacy in the movie itself. And everybody was like, "Oh, yeah, no, change it."

It occurred to me that this particular version of Superman needed a certain version of you and a certain version of the audience. Could 2010 James Gunn have made this film?
I don't think the 2020 James could. Everybody knows I was offered Superman in 2018. They also talked to me about Batman earlier than that, but I was in the middle of *Guardians 3.* If they had come to me in 2018 with Batman, I would've said yes. But, yeah, I just couldn't quite wrap my head around it.

What had to change?
I needed the right way in. And that required time to think through a few thousand options before I got to the way that I thought worked. But I do also think that my life, and career, has been a gradual softening of the edges. I still like black comedy. I still have edges. But I used to like provoking a lot. And today, although I still seem to do it, I don't really like doing that. In my heart, I'm pretty sentimental. I just believe in basic human values. I think *Guardians of the Galaxy* was a good starter kit for that.

They all had a lot of heart.
They have a lot of heart, but they do have their own weirdness and oddities and edginess, and Superman isn't that, even though he does from the outside have a lot of oddness. A flying dog in a cape is odd. Giant walking robots, and kaijus — that's all odd.

But the very-good nature of him, this really strong belief in what's right, sometimes perhaps to a fault, is what makes Superman who he is. And that is not Star-Lord or Rocket. That's not a guy who's angry or covering up his emotions. He's pretty pure. And so getting to the place where I could write that character was a journey. In the past I would've done it through making fun of the character, and I don't think that's what I do here. I'm less afraid now than I used to be. I allow myself to be purely creative more than I used to. And I thought I was being purely creative, but a lot of times it was just anger releasing itself in another way. I'm less afraid of being goofy or sentimental, or boring or straight.

I've seen a bit of the movie, and there's a very grounded interview scene between Lois and Clark that seems like new territory for you.
That's a huge thing for me. I have long talking scenes in *Guardians,* but they are stuffed with jokes. And that's not the case here. There's funny stuff that happens in that scene, but it's all situational. And so allowing myself to write that scene, which is truly about two characters and the different ways they see the world and morality …

So you would've had the impulse to make that more jokey?
Yeah. Horror movies and comedies are so comforting to a filmmaker, because if they're working, the audience is reacting constantly. Even, like, people crying at the end of *Guardians 3.* But it's also a rather selfish thing as a filmmaker. Because I'm not making something so that I can sit in an audience and be happy; I'm making something that really works on a fundamental level. So I have to be willing to sit there with an audience and not know if they're liking it or not.

After you temporarily got fired from Marvel for some old tweets, you've said a ton of friends reached out to you — and that for the first time in your life, you had a transformative experience of feeling truly loved.
There's no doubt that without that experience, I don't think that I would've written the Superman that I wrote. I definitely wouldn't be doing this job if I didn't get fired, but I don't know if I'd be doing this job even if it wasn't for that. I just don't think that a character that pure would've quite appealed to me.

How did that open the door?
I don't think that opened the door to me writing the pure Superman. That opened the door for me to

> "I Still Like Black Comedy. I Still Have Edges. But in My Heart, I'm Pretty Sentimental."

JAMES GUNN

stop creating so that people would like me. That's downplaying it — so people would *love* me. I think on some level, everything I had done came from a pleasing place.

A tap-dancing for the audience kind of thing?
That's exactly right. Which came from that kid in a dysfunctional family trying to make everybody happy by dancing around. Literally that's what my fucking career was; not in total, but it was a neediness on my part. A need to be loved. And one of the most interesting things for me is my relationship with actors. How I got good at working with people like Chris Pratt is because he came in and I'm like, "Stop. You don't need to juggle." Same thing with John Cena. "You don't need to juggle for the audience to like you. You're a fucking movie star. You just be present and be yourself and show that natural vulnerability that's a part of who you are as a human being." And that speaks to people.

So you were giving that advice, but not to yourself at that point.
Really good at giving that advice. But not taking it to heart in a way that was transformative, which is what that moment gave to me. But again, I'm not perfect on the other side of it. It's not like I'm not still doing things to validate myself in some way. That's still a part of me being a fucking imperfect human being, but my basic life choices are not made according to that.

Even you were initially worried about the idea of Rocket in *Guardians*. You said it would be like having Bugs Bunny with the Avengers. So clearly audiences needed to evolve to accept a flying dog in a movie. You paved the way.
That's right. Rocket made the world ready for Krypto. Although, in a way, Krypto is way more grounded than Rocket, because Krypto is simply a superpowered dog. He's just a poorly behaved dog, which is what my dog is. So he's really easy and fun to write.

One of your big innovations here is the sci-fi Silver Age Superman stuff — robots, etc. — that has never been in a live-action film.
Yeah, I think that's the biggest tonally novel thing about this film. And it really is based on the tone of [2000s comic book series] *All-Star Superman* in a lot of ways. And taking that tone into a cinematic realm is not the usual thing for a superhero movie, or for any movie. So I really was thinking a lot when making the film about graphic novels more than movies.

On a story level, what cracked this for you?
It was Krypto. The beginning of the movie is the first thing I wrote, with Krypto coming to Superman in the snow and Krypto taking him home.

> "You Don't Want Everybody to Root for You. It's All Right to Have an Opposing Force."

That really was about the tone of the whole movie. It's a flying dog who wears a cape, but that led immediately to the robots, to the fortress rising from the ground, to the device that isn't in the comics — the giant magnifying glass, which powers him up more quickly than just the regular sun would. Bringing all those elements into a Superman movie in a way that hasn't happened — not to mention that he exists in a world where superheroes, or some form of metahumans, have existed for 300 years. It's just a different thing.

Eddie Murphy once told me that nearly every bad movie happens because of Hollywood's habit of setting a production date before they have a finished screenplay.
Yeah, totally. Listen, you can do everything right and make a bad movie. I'm really compassionate towards people that put their all into a movie. I know some people that were my former workers at Marvel — people who made some of the worst movies. There were people that were lazy and didn't put their time in. And then there were other directors that worked really hard and maybe didn't have the best movie come out, but they did everything they could. But I do believe that the reason why the movie industry is dying is not because of people not wanting to see movies. It's not because of home screens getting so good. The number-one reason is because people are making movies without a finished screenplay.

And that's one of the biggest rules you've made for DC — that they have to have finished scripts.
Yeah. We just killed a project. Everybody wanted to make the movie. It was greenlit, ready to go. The screenplay wasn't ready. And I couldn't do a movie where the screenplay's not good. And we've been really lucky so far, because *Supergirl*'s script was so fucking good off the bat. And then *Lanterns* came in, and the script was so fucking good. *Clayface,* same thing. So fucking good. So we have these scripts that we've been really lucky with or wise in our choices or whatever the combination is.

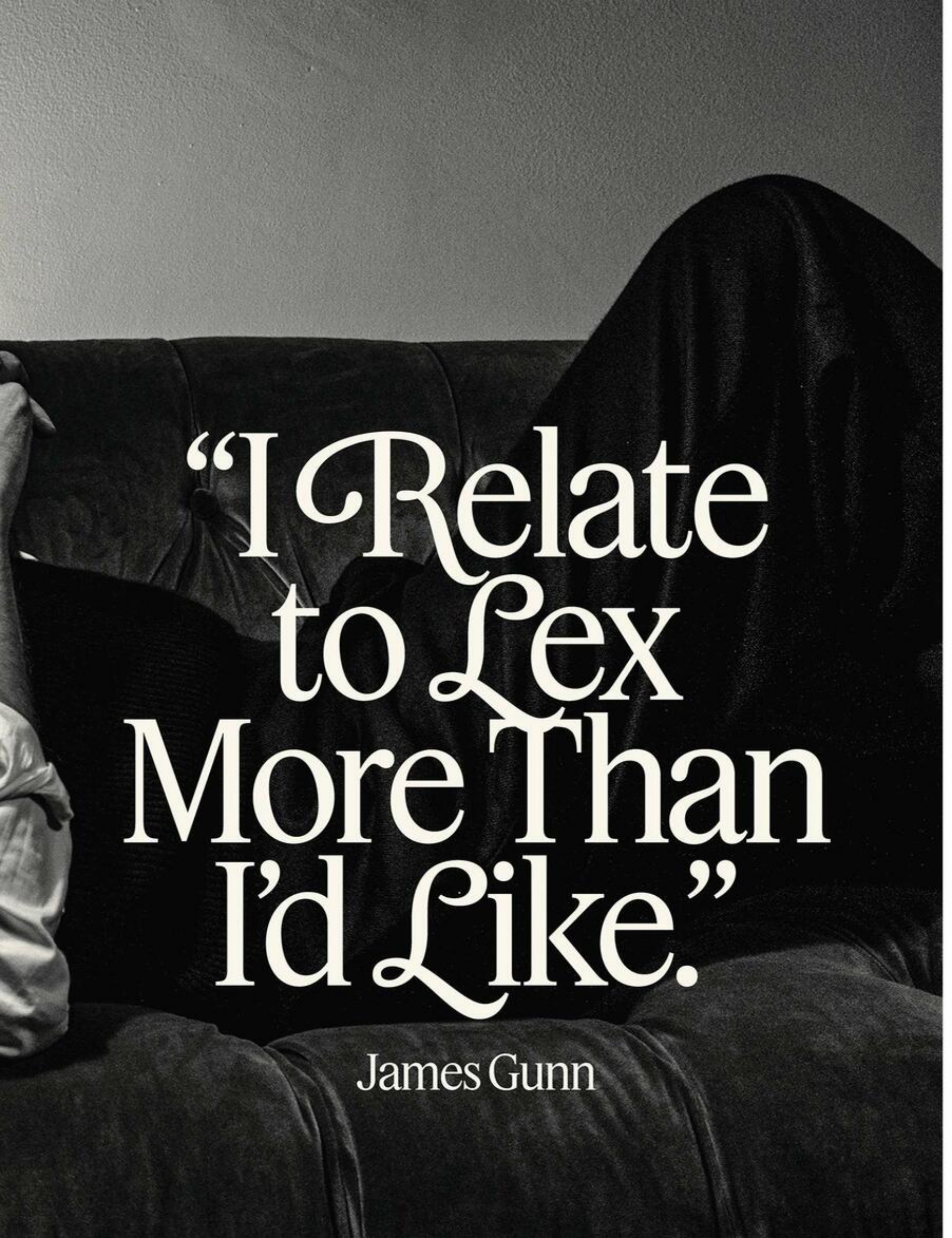
You've written hundreds of pages of material recently between the Creature Commandos animated show, *Peacemaker* Season Two, and *Superman*. Do you ever worry about exhausting the well?
If I do, then I'll go raise goats. I really am fine. There's a lot of directors who get worse as they get older, and I don't wanna do that. Or maybe I do — I don't know. It's like, if it runs out — it hasn't so far. But who knows?

You said you feel like you were able to be creative without fear now, but at the same time, you gave yourself permission to be pretty creative from early on. You were working in all of these different mediums.
I had comic strips published everywhere. That was really what I thought I was gonna do when I was younger. I wanted to be like Berkeley Breathed from *Bloom County*. Although I was also really playing music at the same time, so who knows? I wanted to be a rock star, but at the same time I liked the idea of having my characters on bedsheets and stuff. I just was searching for a way to be noticed and make money. I really wanted to make a living as an artist, and then of course I wanted to be famous and all of those things. So I really was just trying whatever. And for me the whole [secret] was finishing whatever I started. It did feel like I had a bunch of half-projects out there until I was in my mid-twenties.

Was that linked to getting sober — you finishing projects?
No, that was a sort of faith thing. When I was in school for writing, I had 51 first chapters of novels. And then at a certain point I just had the realization, which was in the form of a spiritual awakening, which was just to finish what you start.

You had that revelation while you were ghostwriting a book with Troma studios co-founder Lloyd Kaufman, right?
That's exactly what it was. I was writing the book for Lloyd. And I wanted to quit because it was fucking killing me — I didn't have a small ego, and I felt like I was doing a lot of things for Troma and I didn't feel like I was getting any respect for it. And now I'm ghostwriting something that I thought was hilarious. And the more I was writing it, and the funnier I thought it was, the more resentful I was becoming.

So I talked to Lloyd about "I think I gotta stop." Which was crazy, because I got paid money to do it. A lot of this is really ungrateful of me. I'm not saying this in any good way, but I'm fucking driven. And that's when I had that awakening, which was to finish what you start. And so then I went back and I finished the book. I still hated doing it. But the minute that happened, my life changed within weeks, literally within weeks,


“I Relate
to Lex
More Than
I’d Like.”
James Gunn

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

because that's when I wrote [the 2000 indie film] *The Specials* and finished that. And instantly everything happened.

You've talked about moments of almost spiritual visions — not quite like the ones in your film *Super,* but pretty similar.
Pretty intense. Pretty overall encompassing.

And "finish what you started" was in that category?
A thousand percent. That one was what kept me awake for — that one was long. That was the most intense ever.

What did you experience? What did you see?
I mean it's really — it's long, but my whole life is based on that fucking whatever that was. I have no clue how long it was. Maybe it was an hour, maybe it was seven hours. But, yeah, it was really just aligning a lot of the things I believed about myself, about finishing what you start, about it's not my business whether people think of my shit — my business is doing what I do, and that's it. It was my faith in God, which is a big part of who I am. And yet at the same time, I don't think God really cares whether you believe in him or not. But I heard "Finish what you start." That was like hearing the voice of God as if it was completely outside of me.

You've told me there's an explanation for how Superman's glasses work as a disguise in the movie. What were some of the other things you felt you needed to explain to make this work?
There are things that I know I *don't* explain that I don't even want to say out loud! But I wanted Superman to be vulnerable. I see the online things "Who would beat whom?" — Homelander or Superman or fucking whatever, Adam Warlock or Brightburn, and I'm like, "This is the fucking stupidest fucking conversation." Like, so then whoever would win this fight means that they're the best? Because I'll just go out and write God Man, who can destroy you with a wink. And I win. I win all the fights forever. But I didn't want a Superman who could punch planets. And also we're creating a whole universe now, so what's a girl with wings gonna do in the face of that? So he's a little less powerful. [Green Lantern] Guy Gardner's pretty fucking powerful. They're all pretty powerful.

Honestly, in talking to people, a lot of people are like, "I like Batman better because he can actually be beat," and I get that. So we have a Superman that can be beat.

There are people who've been saying the whole future of the studio might be riding on this movie. How do you work in the face of that kind of pressure?
Really, I just go, "That's their business." Because that's not the truth for me. My truth is this is the first movie out of DC Studios. Other people may say, "It's gotta be a home run, nothing else." I'm like, "No, I'd be very happy with a double." Fucking *Iron Man* wasn't the be-all and end-all. It wasn't *Avatar.* We are doing something that's a piece of the puzzle. It's not the puzzle itself. We have *Peacemaker,* we have *Supergirl,* and what we want to do is make a movie that people love, they feel connected to the characters. It's just this one movie. It's not everything.

I hate it when there's a fucking article and it's going on about all the problems and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and "that means even more pressure on James Gunn and *Superman.*" I'm like, "Guys, I'm not responsible for all that. I'm responsible for my piece of the pie. I've gotta make my budget back. I'll be very happy with that."

You also cannot split planets, is what you're saying.
I cannot split planets. Not that I know of.

Over at Marvel, they've been pretty open about the fact that they realized what's gone wrong over the past few years. They put out too much stuff.
And [longtime Marvel executive producer] Louis [D'Esposito] said that privately to me. I don't even know if it's really their fault.

They were under a corporate mandate, yeah.
That wasn't fair. It wasn't right. And it killed them.

Watching that, especially after being involved, are there lessons to be taken on your end?
There's no doubt. We have to treat every project as if we're lucky. We don't have the mandate to have a certain amount of movies and TV shows every year. So we're going to put out everything that we think is of the highest quality. We're obviously going to do some good things and some not-so-good things, but hopefully on average everything will be as high-quality as possible. Nothing goes before there's a screenplay that I personally am happy with.

Sitting on the table here is a Superman/Spider-Man crossover comic book from the Seventies. At some point, it feels like it's gonna happen in the movies, doesn't it? Maybe it's 10 years from now.
We've talked about it a billion times. That could easily happen, but simultaneous to that, I think it would be interesting. But I also think people are a little over it. I think people wanna see good stories with their superheroes and that's what matters. And they wanna see different types of stories with their superheroes. And people love superheroes. That's obvious, but they need more variety, and they need just more quality storytelling. And just having Spider-Man and Superman team up isn't gonna do it if it's shit. So it's gotta come from a real place, and it's really hard to make that work.

I did *Superman* because I loved the character. And I was excited about writing that movie. If I were to write a Superman-versus-Spider-Man movie, is it a concept I'm gonna be like, "Oh, yeah, this could be a great film"? Or am I doing it because "Oh, yeah, people want to see Superman and Spider-Man team up"? For me, it would have to be — if we ever did that, it would have to be under someone who thought it was gonna be awesome and wasn't just a cash grab, because I'm just not into that.

With this movie, you have people actively rooting against you because they're fans of a previous incarnation of Superman and DC — Zack Snyder's.
[*Fake surprise.*] What? [*Laughs.*]

As you may have heard.
I'm trying to think of how to say this best. I don't mind it. I think it's good. I think you don't wanna have everybody root for you. And I have an actor who reads everything online. I won't say who it is, but he'll read this article, and he'll know who it is. It's one of the top five in *Superman.* And this actor gets so upset over things that people say. I said, "First of all, you realize that the trailer came out and [reaction] was 97, 98 percent positive. These people help us, because you don't want everything to seem 100 percent positive."

It's all right to have an opposing force every once in a while. Some of the things get ridiculous — I just know that every time something comes out, it doesn't matter how positively received, there's gonna be something that is of great controversy. It was great controversy that the sun caused Superman pain.

But that's not what was happening. That was his bones snapping back together, right?
It's like when a doctor resets your bone, you scream, but it doesn't fucking matter. Because is that really a controversy? Is that really something that you're upset about? Or did you have a hard time finding something to be upset about? There's always going to be that. There's going to be something that people are upset about, and it's OK. This actor reads everything. He reads every fucking Reddit thread. He watches all of the videos, including by the people who make their livings by hating us. That's how they make all their money. But you don't have to watch their videos where they're talking about how you're awful. You can't be reading it all the time. It'll fucking murder you. It's a terrible thing to do to your soul.

Is this actor your lead, David Corenswet?
It's a hundred percent not David. David is Superman. He's not a normal person.

What was your way into Lex Luthor?
I really understand Lex. I feel like I relate to Lex way more than I wish I did. But for me, Lex looks at Superman like artists look at AI. He is the world's greatest man in so many ways. He's done these unparalleled things. And then you got a guy who comes in who's done nothing to deserve the ability to fly and to smash down buildings. And

JAMES GUNN

he's also extraordinarily handsome, too. And all of a sudden that's all the world is talking about. And that sort of obsession with being replaced, with being — with your gifts not being seen or passed over — I think is what drives Lex. I relate to everything he does. He's just meaner than I am.

Do you know what you're writing and directing next? As far as film?
Yeah, probably. I know what I'm writing right now.

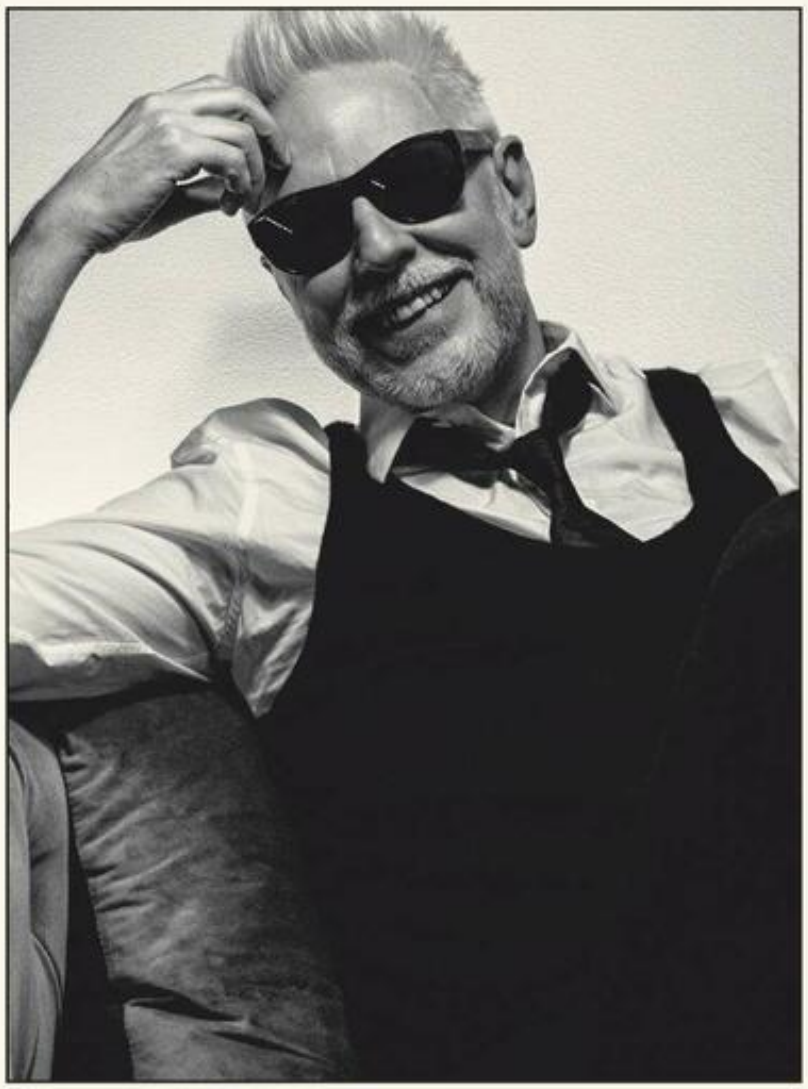
And it's a DC film.
Yeah. Nothing yet. I'm just getting into it. I really have a hard time writing when I'm in the late stages of postproduction, which is — we're almost done, but I really have a hard time. I traditionally start heavily writing the day whatever my last movie comes out. I write treatments first, so I'm a couple treatments in.

You once said that the fact that Robert Pattinson's Batman is not in this universe was Matt Reeves' choice. Does that mean if it were up to you, you would've just pulled that into your universe?
It would be a consideration. We'd have to think about it. We'd have to think about it. It is not like we've never discussed it.

It's interesting, your answer is much more present tense than I expected. As if it's an ongoing possibility.
No, I don't — Batman's my biggest issue in all of DC right now, personally. And it's not — I'm not writing Batman, but I am working with the writer of Batman and trying to get it right, because he's incredibly important to DC, as is Wonder Woman. So outside of the stuff that I'm doing in the projects that are actively going, our two priorities are finishing our Wonder Woman and our Batman scripts.

The Batman script — is that still called *The Brave and the Bold*?
Right now, yeah. Right now.

In the broadest sense, what needs to be figured out to make those two properties work — Batman in this universe?
Batman has to have a reason for existing, right? So Batman can't just be "Oh, we're making a Batman movie because Batman's the biggest character in all of Warner Bros.," which he is. But because there's a need for him in the DCU and a need that he's not exactly the same as Matt's Batman. But yet he's not a campy Batman. I'm not interested in that. I'm not interested in a funny, campy Batman, really. So we're dealing with that. I think I have a way in, by the way. I think I really know what it's — I just am dealing with the writer to make sure that we can make it a reality.



"I Had to Stop Creating So That People Would Love Me. My Career Was a Neediness."

And how about for Wonder Woman?
Similar. Wonder Woman I think is actually easier for me, because there haven't been so many infinite portrayals of Wonder Woman — definitely not in movies, but really anywhere — that there have been of Batman. Every single Batman story has been told. It seems like half the comics that have come out of DC over the past 30 years have Batman in them. He's the most famous superhero in the world and the most popular superhero in the world. And people love him because he's interesting, but also having so much of him out there can also make him boring. So how do you create that property that's fun to watch?

I really should clear this up. Is there still a non-zero chance that Matt Reeves' Batman will get sucked into your universe?
[*Long pause.*] I would never say zero, because you just never know. But it's not likely. It's not likely at all. I'll also say *Batman Part II* is not canceled. That's the other thing I hear all the time — that *Batman Part II* is canceled. It's not canceled. We don't have a script. Matt's slow. Let him take his time. Let him do what he's doing. God, people are mean. Let him do his thing, man.

How do you want to be remembered? Have you thought about this?
I don't give a shit. I want to be remembered that I was nice to my family, that my family and friends love me, but I don't believe in any of that shit. First of all, everything's a sand castle. Somebody wrote me that the other day. "We have these problems, but that doesn't last. What will be remembered forever is the movies." I'm like, "No, it won't. It's just fucking disintegrating with everything else." What I really do care [about is] that I'm good to my wife, and I really do care that I'm good to my friends and my brothers and my sister and my mom.

I went to the funeral of one friend a few years ago, and he was split up from his wife, but he hadn't treated her well, hadn't treated his friends well. He had stood me up three times, supposed to meet me for lunch or something, and didn't show up. Funerals are always sad, but I think there's a kind of fulfilling sad where people are crying because they love somebody so much. And then there's this sort of depressing sad, where it's like he just disappointed everybody, and it's really hard for people to say nice things. We loved him, but it was hard, and that really affected me. I'm like, "I don't want my funeral to be that." So I guess I really do think about it sometimes, but in terms of that: I want people to cry because I was good to them. ®

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THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

CHARLAMAGNE THA GOD

RADIO HOST & MEDIA MOGUL

'I'm Not Looking for an Amen Corner'

Suppose your idea of radio personality Charlamagne tha God comes from clips of the veteran host's most absurd moments on his show, *The Breakfast Club*. Like, when he asked Magic Johnson his first thought after receiving his HIV diagnosis. Or when, during a segment with rapper and actor Safaree, he blurted out "Nah, that ain't it" in response to the artist freestyling. You might expect the real-life Charlamagne, born Lenard Larry McKelvey in Charleston, South Carolina, to mirror the unfiltered provocateur listeners have tuned into for nearly 30 years. In person, he is no doubt an apostle of the Biggie Smalls lyric "Bite my

By JEFF IHAZA • Photographs by XAVIER SCOTT MARSHALL

THE THINKER
Charlamagne tha God photographed in New York in May

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

tongue for no one." Adorned in a T-shirt featuring the animated political satire *The Boondocks,* he's at ease in the iHeartRadio studios in midtown Manhattan, more than happy to offer his take on just about everything.

But this version of Charlamagne, who turned 47 in June, is not the one you might've seen in viral videos. With decades in the public eye, and on what he describes as a "healing journey," the Charlamagne in front of me on this rainy spring afternoon is rather zen. He is well aware that his older persona differs, in some ways wildly, from his current, more mature sensibility. "It's something my good friend [author and wellness guru] Devi Brown always says: 'You got to learn to love every single version of yourself. Every single version of yourself serves a purpose.'"

The author of three bestsellers, and the founder of the podcast network Black Effect, as well as the Black Privilege publishing imprint with Simon & Schuster, Charlamagne has made storytelling his life's work. These days, married with four daughters, he tells me his primary focus is finding ways to be "of service." He's an outspoken advocate for mental health and has been candid in his books about his challenges growing up in South Carolina, experiencing abuse and incarceration at a young age. He founded the nonprofit organization the Mental Wealth Alliance with Alfiee Breland-Noble in 2019, and he supports a scholarship at his mother's alma mater, South Carolina State University, for Black students to study English or communications. Charlamagne says his mental health work allows him to look back on his past with a sense of clarity.

"There's been plenty of times I came on this radio and projected my hurt on the people. There's been plenty of times I came on this radio and projected my unhealed trauma on the people," he says. "And that's why doing the work is so important. It will change you as a person, which ultimately changes you as a personality."

Even so, some things don't change. Charlamagne's routine has remained more or less the same for his decades-long career in radio: Up at the crack of dawn and live on the airwaves shortly after. "Literally, this is my life," he says, seated in a conference room adjacent to the studios where *The Breakfast Club* records each morning. "To be a morning-radio personality, you're setting people's tone for the day."

Over the years, Charlamagne built the kind of deeply personal relationship with his audience that presaged the always-on culture of content creators of the 21st century. It's what makes *The Breakfast Club,* which he's co-hosted since 2010, a cultural force. By now, the show has become a reliably authentic dialogue within the Black community — during the past two presidential elections, Charlamagne was the go-to conduit between Democratic politicians and undecided Black voters. His career consists of multitudes: the comedic if not brash hip-hop radio host forged by the shock-jock era, and the thoughtful political commentator, able to articulate what even his critics would describe as a pretty nuanced perspective on the world.

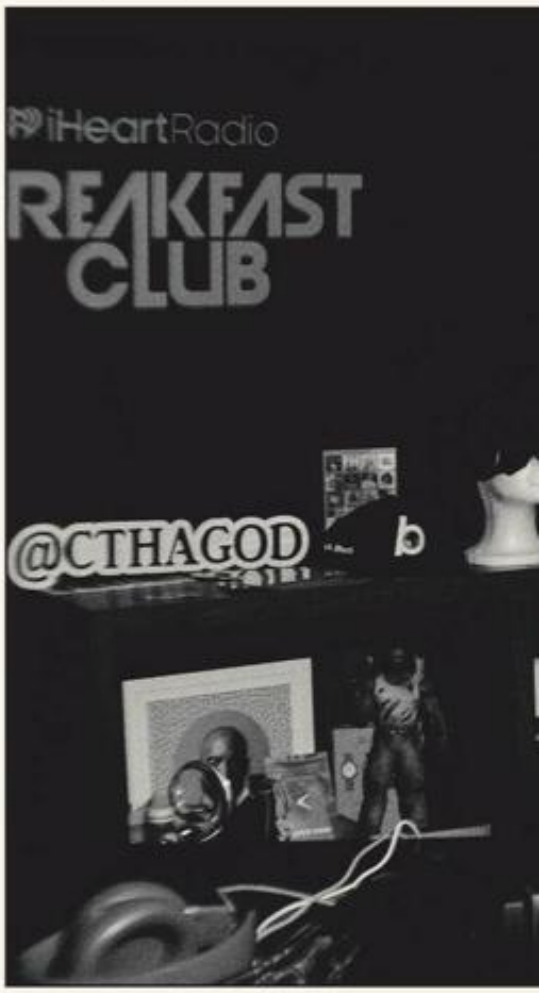
"I'm happy that people can go back to certain moments and hear certain things and be like, 'Bruh, that dude. He really has grown; he used to be really wild. He might still be a little wild now, but he used to be really, really wild,'" he says. "And for the people who say things like, 'Man, I miss the old Charlamagne. I want that back' — go back and listen to the old shit then."

> "We Know Speech Ain't Free. There's a Price That Comes Out of Your Mouth."

Right now, downtown, Sean "Diddy" Combs is on trial for sex trafficking, prostitution, and racketeering. You've talked to him many times over the years. What's going through your mind as this situation is unfolding?

It's sad. And people got mad at me, I think it was last year, because I said that when it first happened. I'm like, "Yo, we got to stop acting like these situations don't bring out a plethora of emotions." This is complex, especially if you're a hip-hop head. I was in jail writing down things I wanted to do for my future, saying I wanted to be signed to Bad Boy in '96, '97, because I used to rap. And so for me, man, just sitting back watching the situation, yeah, it is sad to watch yet another one of us … That's what it feels like, right? It feels like, another one of us. I've been watching this my whole life. Michael Jackson, Bill Cosby, R. Kelly. It's like, damn. So, yeah, it's not a good feeling. It's not something that you … Don't get me wrong. Some of the shit's hilarious. We need *The Boondocks* and Dave Chappelle to come back right now. Because just this week, another man says he wants the other man's nuts rubbed on his nipples? Come on, yo. You're not going to sit here and tell me that's not comedy.

I can't act like it's one emotion. It's easy to say, "Oh, man, fuck him. He's a piece of shit," blah, blah, blah, this and that. Yeah, he might be all of those things, but guess what? He also was somebody that every single time we was out in the party, he got the party started. He was a person that all of y'all was running around saying you was the Diddy of your city. Don't act like you weren't, now, OK? I see you changing your Instagram names and all of that, but at one point that was your guy. So that shit, it just sucks to watch.



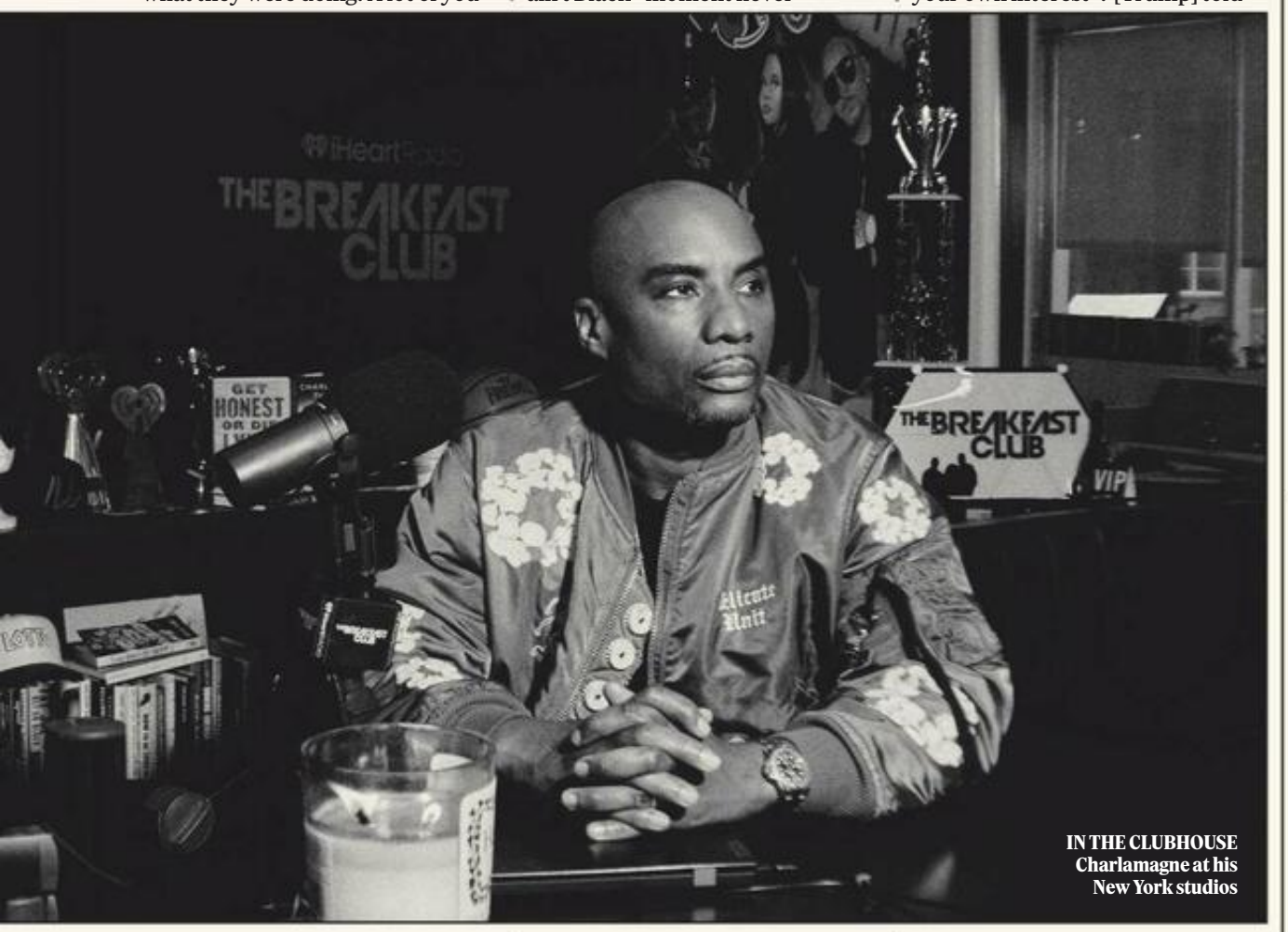
And it ain't just him. There's plenty of people you watch crash and burn. That's why I see certain brothers, man, certain sisters that have been around a long time, and I literally give them a pound and I compliment them because I say to them, I say, "Man, your plane has landed and the wheels came out." Everybody always talks about the ascension and being up in the air, but when you land, you got to make sure your wheels come out. There's

STYLING BY TYSHA AMPADU. JACKET BY DENIM TEARS. GROOMING BY BRENDA COLON AND TYRONE WHITESIDE. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY SANTANA JIMENEZ.

CHARLAMAGNE THA GOD

a lot of people landing whose wheels ain't coming out, and they're crashing and burning.

What do you make of the narrative that there's an effort to take down prominent Black men?
Listen, that is a narrative that is rooted in truth. We can't act like that has not happened throughout the history of Black people's existence in this country. We've seen that, whether it's the Nation of Islam, whether it's the Black Panther Party, whether it is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But think about those people I named and what they were doing. A lot of you



IN THE CLUBHOUSE
Charlamagne at his New York studios

entertainers just got bad fucking habits. Cut it out. Ain't nobody trying to take y'all down. When people say it's a shakedown, sure, but don't give them nothing to shake. Make better choices. It's really just that simple. At some point you got to have accountability and stop pointing fingers and blaming everything on the system or the white man. We'll name all of those people in the entertainment space, in the sports space, and then try to lump them in with people who actually were really changing the world. Yeah, have we seen this system take down Black people before? Of course, that's what Cointelpro was, all of that. That's what J. Edgar Hoover specialized in, absolutely. But a lot of these entertainers, they're just making poor choices.

I'm thinking of the time Joe Biden came on the show during the 2020 presidential race and said, "If you have a problem figuring out if you're for me or for Trump, you ain't Black." Have there been moments where a white person is maybe taking liberties with the fact that they're speaking to a Black audience on the show?
Do you know why Joe Biden's "you ain't Black" moment never bothered me? My reaction in that moment was my real reaction. This ain't about who's Black, it's about trying to get something for my people. That's how he really felt, and that's because he had a bunch of Black people around him who used to say that. And I'm not making no excuses for him, because I'm not nobody fan, but that was just a bad granddad joke. And shit, was he wrong? All he's essentially saying is, "Yo, if you vote for this person, you're voting against your own interest." And it's interesting, because 2020, he won. People didn't feel like that. Now, [Trump is] back in the White House, and you see a lot of his own supporters, the Candace Owenses of the world, the Ben Shapiros of the world, you see them saying, "What the hell is going on?" Candace Owens is calling Trump out, saying, "You can't do that in regards to freedom of speech." Saying, "I don't like what he's doing with DOGE." You got Dave Portnoy trying to figure out what's going on with his stocks, the economy's messed up. You got Shapiro calling him out about taking the jet from [Qatar]. You can't do that. So it's like, was Biden wrong when he told Black people, "You voting against your own interest"? [Trump] told you he was going to do all of those things. So if you voted for that, you voted against your own interest.

People have lumped you in with the comedian Andrew Schultz, your co-host on the podcast *Brilliant Idiots*. Kendrick Lamar seemed to take a shot at him for a joke about Black women that he made on a different show, and the internet brought your name into it. What do you make of the critique that you were allowing this white man to speak too freely?
Everybody is allowed to have their opinion. Andrew Schultz is a grown man, I don't "allow" him to do anything. He does what he wants to do. I don't even know what my reaction would've been if I heard him say that [on our show]. Probably it wouldn't have been nothing, because the reality is, that is somebody I actually know. We've been doing *Brilliant Idiots* for 12 years, and we've been friends longer than that. I know his mom, I know his dad. He knows my family. He was at my wedding; I was at his wedding. How are you going to tell me who he is? You don't even know him, you know a clip. If that was your introduction to Andrew, that probably wasn't the best introduction. But if you know Andrew, his die-hard fans that travel with him all around the world, selling out these arenas, that sold out the Garden — twice — they know his style of comedy. And listen, sometimes you shoot, sometimes you miss. But a comedian has the right to be a comedian. People have the right to free speech. But we know speech ain't free. There's a price that comes out of your mouth. And the reason I rock with Andrew is because he's willing to deal with the consequences of the things that come out of his mouth.

Do you go back and watch your old interviews a lot, or do you stay away from the past?
Sometimes you'll just see clips. And like I said, I'm 46, so I'm like, "What the fuck was I talking about?" So I got to go back and watch the whole interview for context. I do that a lot. Or when somebody passes, I go back and I watch the interview just to see if they were immortalized the right way.

That's why every time you sit down and you talk to somebody, man, you got to make sure you really having that real conversation. Because regardless of whether we know when we're leaving this Earth or not, these conversations we're having with these individuals are going to be immortalized. I've been doing this long enough to know that. We're on a lot of documentaries, *Breakfast Club*. People reach out to us all the time to license content, because we've been around that long. Look on the wall in the studio: Charlie Murphy not here no more. Prodigy not here no more. Mac Miller not here no more. Nipsey Hussle. Dick Gregory. Angie Stone. That's

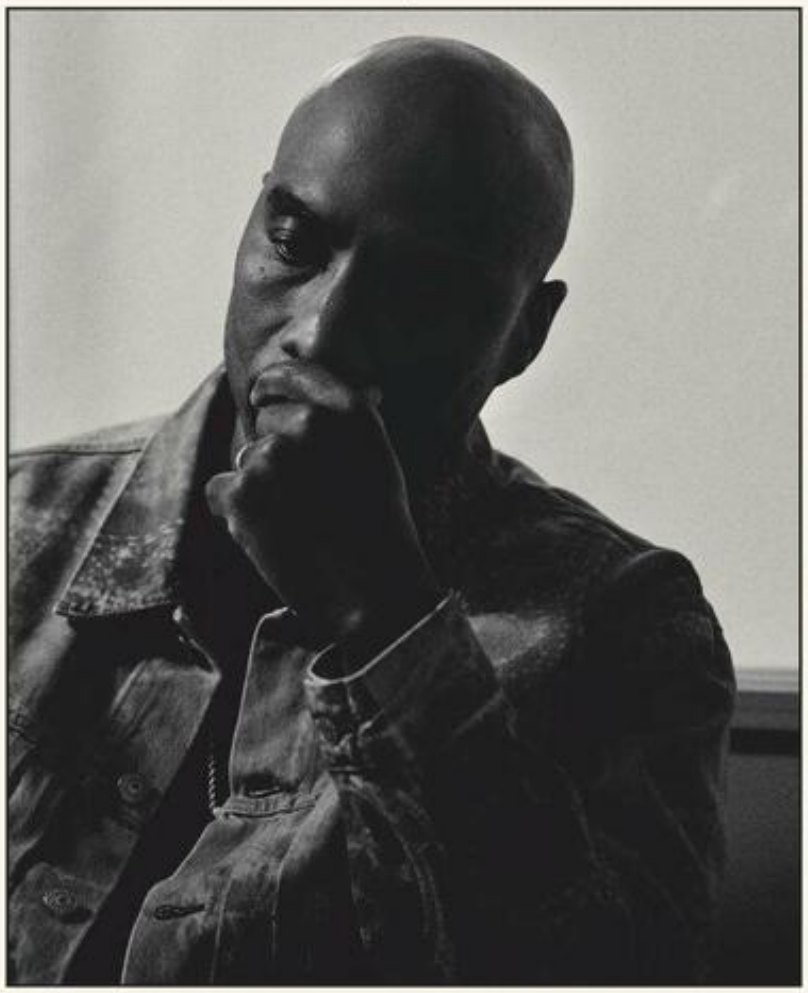
THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

actually the last time I did that — I went to watch Angie's last conversation with us. One big theme of that interview was her talking about wanting to do a biopic, because a lot of people don't know the history. Angie was in a rap group. I think that might've been hip-hop's first female rap group, literally.

Recently, I've talked to a lot of Twitch streamers like Kai Cenat. I've come to realize how similar that world is to radio. What do you think of the new generation of commentators online?
I love those guys. I was just thinking about this the other day. I love streaming more than any of the new-media platforms that I've seen over the last 15 years, including podcasting. It's the closest thing to what I do on the radio every day, because these guys are going live. Wendy Williams could go live by herself for four hours straight and be super entertaining, her and the callers. And that's what these streamers are doing. Kai can go live for hours and be sitting there with his chat, keeping them engaged, doing an interview, talking about some music, whatever it is. Kai, DJ Akademiks. The dude Reggie [Twitch streamer girlhefunny1x]. That dude is hilarious to me. I just like his energy. And the other beautiful thing about guys like Kai and Reggie is, man, you watch them and you're like, "Yo, y'all can do whatever y'all choose to do." They're just using streaming as the platform that gets their name out there and people start to know them. But you can take Reggie and Kai and put them on radio. You can put them on TV, in movies. If they wanted to do a podcast, they could. They can do whatever.

Do you feel like there's still something special about the terrestrial-radio audience?
It's the most unique media platform still around, because everybody's commuting in the morning. People have this silly notion that radio is dead. It's like, go look at the numbers. The same percentage of people in America who used to listen to the radio in the Eighties, Nineties is the same percentage of people who listen to the radio now. It's like 90-something percent of people. Why? Because radios are still in cars, and people are waking up every morning all around the country and turning on this free entertainment. Now they got the apps, they got whatever app they're listening to, and they're listening to it on their commute. So, radio has gone nowhere.

You have four daughters. As they grow up and start watching whatever is out there, whether it's YouTube, podcasts, or something else, do you pay attention to the content they consume?
Absolutely, a hundred percent. My oldest daughter, she'll be 17 this year. She talks to [my wife and me], so I ain't tripping off that. It's the nine-year-old and the six-year-old, the three-year-old that I'm more concerned about, because what they like to watch is YouTube. You got to pay attention to that, because I don't know what this shit is. You know what I'm saying? So I got to watch it. Sometimes I'm like, "Yo, what the hell these people talking about?" Because my daughter really likes *Minecraft,* so she used to be watching these videos of people playing *Minecraft*. But sometimes it'll be cut with something else. So it's like, you got to pay attention to what they're actually on. And it's interesting to see who is having that intergenerational impact. My six-year-old knows who MrBeast is.



When you started in the 1990s going into the 2000s, we hadn't entered the nonstop news cycle. What was that like for you in those early years of social media, when you started to see that shift?
I remember me and Lil Duval met on MySpace because we were both writing for *Ozone* magazine. That's how you got your name out there nationally; you had to write for a national magazine. So I was writing for *Ozone* at the time. I had a [column] called the Chin Check, and I think Duval's was called What I'm Hating On or something like that. And Duval just hit me, like, "Yo, you funny as hell. I like what you be doing." When YouTube and all that stuff started to come around, we started to utilize it. I was doing skits and sketches. And guess what? In my mind, I wasn't thinking people all over the country are seeing this, or even people all over the world. In my mind, I'm still just doing this for South Carolina.

Back then it was mixtapes, too. DJ Vlad used to have these mixtapes called *Beef.* And he literally was taking my interviews and putting them on his *Beef* mixtapes. So that's how I was getting out there nationally. It was beautiful because it was very hyperlocal. I still treat it that way. When I wake up in the morning and I get on the air, even though I know *Breakfast Clu*b is in 100-plus markets, I'm not treating it like I'm talking to tens of millions of people. I'm treating it like I'm talking to really just who's in the room, honestly. I don't have a target audience in my mind, and I think that's a good thing.

I feel like, back then being a hater was a little bit easier because you weren't quite broadcasting it to the whole world like today.
It's not like people didn't see those things, it was just probably a little bit harder for them to reach you. You could only get touched if you was around a person. Or a person couldn't just "at" you on social media. If a person had a problem with you, you didn't know until it was too late. Like, "Oh, we in the same place. The same vicinity. What's happening now?" Now, you do know when somebody got an issue with you because they said something about you on social media, on some platform. Back then, it definitely wasn't like that.

Has that changed your approach at all? Do you feel like you operate the same way today?
Nah, I'm not the same person. Shit, when I started radio, I was 19. So you're talking about a teenager, a guy in his twenties. I'm 46 now. My mind state was totally different, I wasn't thinking about nothing back then. It was just shits and giggles, it was fun. It was, "I'm going to say what I want to say because I want to say it." I still feel like I operate in that space — I'm 46 years old, and I say what I want to say *now.* If what I wanted to say was the same at 46 as I was at 20, man, that's a big problem. Muhammad Ali said, "The person who thinks the same at 50 the way they did at 20 has wasted 30 years of their life."

You don't self-censor out of concern for so-called cancel culture?
Cancel culture has been canceled. People have the right to be outraged. People have the right to disagree; all of that is fine. The reason I say that I still approach

CHARLAMAGNE THA GOD

things from a hyperlocal perspective is because I can tell when somebody is approaching the microphone and they're concerned about what the people listening are going to say. What the people who are home on social media are going to say. When the reality is, people are going to disagree with you. I'm not looking for an amen corner, these are my thoughts. This is the way I'm feeling in this moment, and I reserve the right to change my mind.

I might say something one day and get more information and be like, "Yeah, I wasn't correct yesterday. That's how I felt yesterday, but this is how I feel today." There's nothing wrong with that. People nowadays like to say things and then just either stick to it because of pride, because of ego, or let it go just because they scared of the mob. You can't trust folks like that. Say what you say. If it's right, it's right. If it's wrong, it's wrong. If that person changes their mind, they have the right to do that as well, but at least that person is being honest.

Do you think that plays into the election results? Trump speaks to people's raw emotions, versus Democrats, who tend to be a bit more polished. From your perspective, what have you seen since the election that gives you the sense that cancel culture has been canceled?

Well, I've been saying that forever as far as Trump is concerned. In my last book, *Get Honest About Lying,* I got a whole chapter called "The Language of Politics Is Dead," and it's because Donald Trump killed it. I grew up on this fantastic movie called *Bulworth,* which I think everybody should watch. It stars Warren Beatty and Halle Berry and Don Cheadle. And Bulworth is a guy who was a senator in California who ends up running for president because he actually wants to kill himself. And he hired somebody to kill him. And so he's sitting around, he falls in love with Halle Berry, so he starts hanging out in the hood. So he's listening to Don Cheadle, who's the head of a gang, talk about all of the sociological conditions that are causing people in the hood to act the way that they're acting.

And so Bulworth starts to repeat this stuff, because it's the truth, right? So the thing about the truth is, you can't run from it. The truth will impact you in some way, shape, or form. So he just goes out there, and he just starts telling the truth. And I've always said, "Man, that will work. That will work." This movie came out in the Nineties. I was a kid watching that, saying that would work in our society if a politician did that, because that works anywhere. There's never a time where honesty and authenticity don't work. Our whole lives, we've sat back and watched politicians and know they're bullshitting us. Whenever you saw a politician actually telling us the truth, whether it was on a local level or a national level, it cut through. Now, was Donald Trump telling the truth? No, not about everything. But he gave off more of an authentic energy than anybody we've seen in a long time.

I always said Republicans are more sincere about their lies. Trump is more sincere about his lies than any Democrat in the modern area is about their truth. He'll get up there and tell you a bald-faced lie with the utmost confidence. I don't even think he believes he's lying. I think he really believes the things that are coming out of his mouth in whatever moment he's saying it. That's why it comes off as authentic. Meanwhile, a Democrat can be up there trying to tell you the truth, and they stuttering and they stammering and they looking down and they barely want to even talk about whatever the real issue is that they actually probably have a solution for or are passing legislation for.

Can you cite an example of that?

Recently, Donald Trump signed an executive order to lower the price of prescription drugs. And he did a speech where he was talking about his "fat friend" who called him and said, "Hey, I've been taking such and such." And he told his friend it's not working and blah, blah. It's like, yo, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris signed the actual piece of legislation that capped the price of the insulin at $35. I got family members who were super happy about that. But Trump was able to message a simple executive order. It was funny, and it got so much press. And now you see people like, "Yeah, Trump's lowering the price of prescription drugs." Biden and Harris actually passed legislation that did that, and they weren't able to make the noise Trump did. That's because Donald Trump hit you with storytelling. He told you a story. It was funny, it stuck. Democrats don't do anything that sticks.

> "Cancel Culture Has Been Canceled. People Have the Right to Be Outraged. People Have the Right to Disagree."

What would you ask Trump if you had the opportunity?

I would have to think about it. Especially during the campaign, I had a strategy of how I want to interview Trump. And I'm not even going to say it, because I don't want nobody to steal my idea. But honestly, it don't even matter now, because he's the president. The only thing we should be telling our fellow Americans right now is that when you are the president of the United States of America, it is your job to uphold the Constitution. Simple and plain.

And I don't care if you're a Democrat, I don't care if you're Republican. I don't care if you're Black, I don't care if you're white. I don't care if you're gay, I don't care if you're straight. I don't care if you're rich, I don't care if you're poor. If you're an American, you should want the leader of your country to always uphold the Constitution. So when you hear the leader of the free world saying things like he doesn't know if he has to uphold the Constitution, or taking $400 million jets from foreign countries … These are clear-cut things in the Constitution that he shouldn't be doing. So you as an American have to point out the fact that what he's doing is unconstitutional. That's what we should care about in this moment.

How do you reconcile the fact that, given the length of your career, there are so many versions of you floating around out there?

I don't. To me, I look at it like a rapper probably looks at it. Jay-Z probably sits back and looks at *4:44* as a moment in time. But then he looks at *Hard Knock Life* as a moment in time. He looks at *Reasonable Doubt* as a moment in time. And I've had conversations with people like Malcolm Gladwell — I remember Malcolm Gladwell broke my heart one time. I can't remember what book it was, but he was like, "I don't even believe most of what I wrote in this book anymore." And I'm like, "What?" But when he broke it down, it made sense. "That's where I was then. This new work that I'm writing is where I am now." And that's just life. I thank God that I got that type of catalog.

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

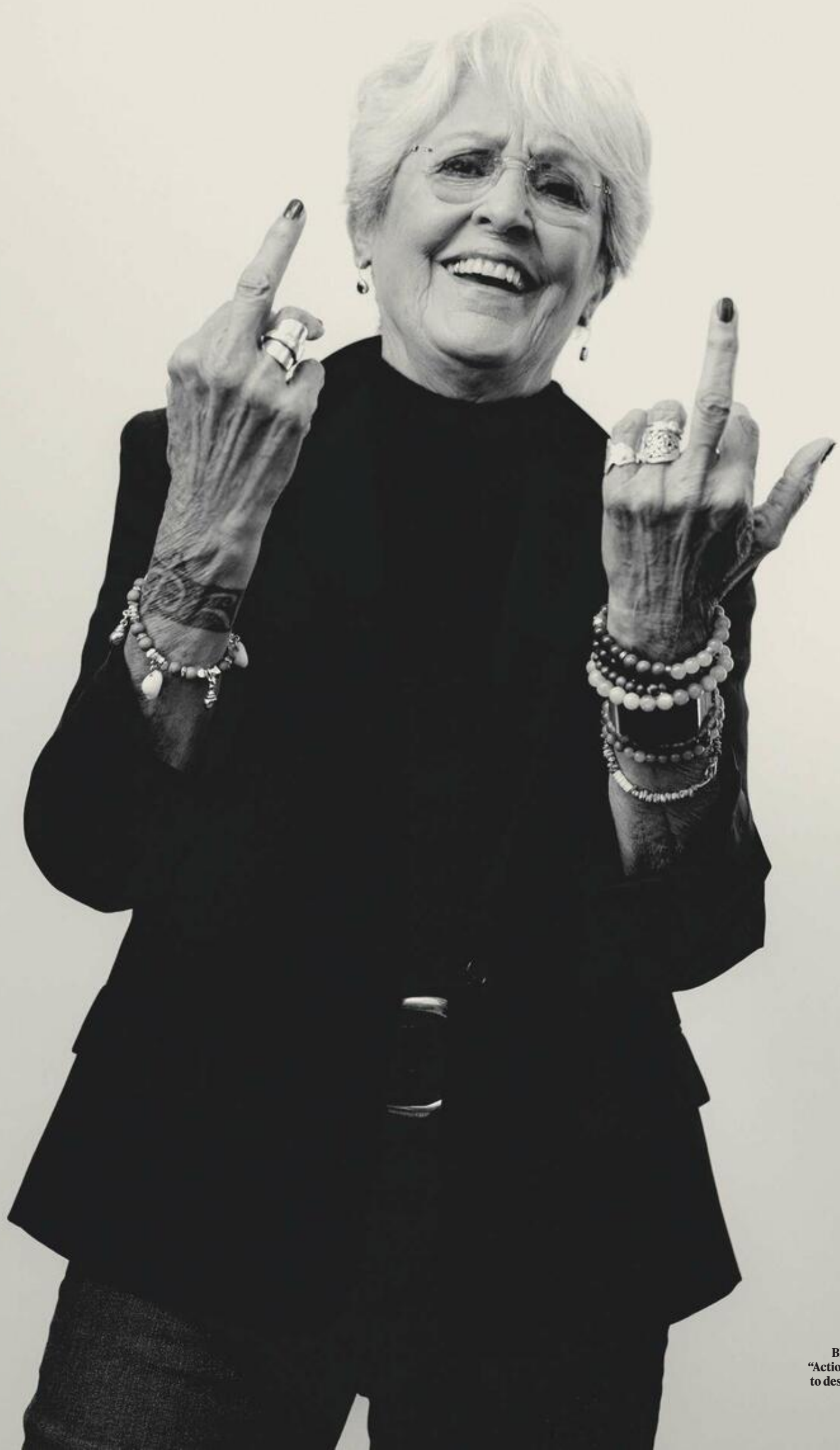
JOAN BAEZ

MUSICIAN & ACTIVIST

'This Is a Life Well-Lived'

Pull into the tree-cloaked driveway of Joan Baez's home south of San Francisco and roam around her house and the first thing you'll notice are oversize portraits she's painted of Volodymyr Zelensky, Martin Luther King Jr., Anthony Fauci, Gandhi, and the late congressman John Lewis. For years, Baez would display two at a time in her front yard, but now they lean forlornly on a porch. ● "Just after Trump got elected [last fall], somebody tattled to somebody in the city, who says, 'Does she have permits?'" Baez says. "It was clearly a snitchy kind of thing." While one of her friends cut the paintings down,

By DAVID BROWNE • Photographs by ULYSSES ORTEGA



BIRD-WATCHING
"Action is the antidote to despair," Baez says.

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

Baez went into the tree house in her front yard and blasted recordings by soprano opera singer Renée Fleming. "It was my way of civil disobedience," she says with a mischievous grin. "Just to do something."

For decades in the public eye, Baez has been doing something in the name of music, social justice, and civil rights. She's been lionized, condemned (even sometimes by the left), mocked, dismissed, revered, and occasionally rediscovered. That part of her life seemed to start winding down six years ago, when Baez wrapped up a farewell tour that, she insists, is genuinely final.

At that point, Baez, now 84,

> "Courage Is a Funny Thing.... It's Being Willing to Do Stuff, Even if You're Scared."

entered what should have been her chill-out years, devoted to painting and writing poetry, dancing daily around her property to the Gipsy Kings, and spending time in the rambling, funky-but-chic house where she's lived for 55 years.

But as seen by the hubbub over her paintings of activists and public figures, Baez keeps getting pulled back in. Start with the Bob Dylan biopic, *A Complete Unknown,* which thrust her fraught, long-ago relationship with Dylan (played by Timothée Chalamet) back into the spotlight. Monica Barbaro's largely spot-on performance introduced Baez, her music, and her folk-Madonna image to a generation born decades later. And then there is, once more, Trump. When *Rolling Stone* last visited Baez here, he had just been elected president for the first time. Now that he's returned to the White House, more disruptive and alarming than before, Baez has again found herself at rallies and released a new protest song, "One in a Million," with fellow veteran troubadour Janis Ian.

But as Baez admits, both today at her home and in a follow-up interview, she is also entering a new and challenging world. Brewing up a fresh pot of coffee, Baez, in a black turtleneck with her hair in a silver bob, settles in at her kitchen table. "This is an interesting time," she says, "because I've never been here before."

When we last talked here, it was right after Donald Trump's 2016 election. Who would have thought we'd be here again?
Surprised the shit out of me. Nobody could have dreamed this up. Nobody could have predicted that it would turn into what it's turned into, because that's for *other* countries, the "shithole countries." This is turning into a shithole country because of them. It's all the evil things that shithole countries do. On the other hand, we've all sort of known that the Heritage Foundation has been plugging away and making plans, and we just weren't prepared.

Where were you on election night when you heard the results?
Oh, here. I didn't hear the results. I saw my neighbor's face. I knew it was a disaster. But the truth is it's been in the works for 50 years. It's not even about Trump. He just turned out to be this wizard of a disgusting human being who gives people the right to do what he does.

Is there anything in particular this administration has done that has really shocked you?
In the first 100 days, sending people like that [*snaps fingers*] to prisons known for torture. All the work I did in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and the Eastern Bloc, and it's the same mechanism, with all the ruthlessness and the steps to the dictatorship.

I'm worried about the speed at which they're doing it and where they're going, and the horrible cruelty that takes place every day. I really appreciated Bruce Springsteen repeating "It's happening *now*" [during his concerts in the U.K.]. Because you tend to say, "Oh, it's going to be a rough four years." No, it's now.

How often do you watch the news?
When I was retired from touring, I thought, "I'll watch once in a while." But it wasn't like this. So, I dole it out. I read Substack and watch Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, and John Oliver. And then I'll turn on a movie like *Twilight*. Just terrible. But it's wonderful to watch. It's got nothing to do with fucking anything.

Do you take any—
Drugs? [*Laughs.*]

Well, that, but also consolation in some of the pushback Trump has received from the courts.
You have to take some heart in that. My beautiful granddaughter Jasmine is a singer-songwriter but

decided she wanted to be a lawyer. She'll be going to law school in August, and I'm thinking, "What a time!" She wants to be a constitutional lawyer. We're not going to *have* a fucking Constitution very likely. So, all I can do with my son and my granddaughter is walk through this day by day and encourage her to do what she's doing.

I was just listening to your performance at Woodstock, where you told the crowd about the federal agents showing up at your and your ex-husband and activist David Harris' home to arrest him for resisting the draft. You even had a party to send him off. In terms of that kind of arrest, does anything happening now remind you of that moment?
You know, it's so different now that I can't even make that connection. People say, "Is this like the Sixties?" I say the Sixties was a garden party. For some people, it wasn't. Some people really got hurt. But this now is a machine.

In your second memoir, you wrote about the impact of hearing Martin Luther King speak. Is there anybody these days who's inspired you in the same way?
The Rev. William Barber came to dinner the other night; he's a pal. He has the spirit of God within him, and he's determined to spread it. We're looking into this avalanche, and you [have to] stand up like when he went in the Capitol

rotunda the other day and got himself arrested. He was praying in there, and he just said, "I had to do it."

What about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez?
She's good. Smart. And I think she probably put herself on the line, but on the line *now*.... I used to encourage people, "Come with us. We get arrested, whatever." But it's just so dangerous. Taking a risk now could be standing on the corner in a T-shirt that says "I'm an illegal immigrant." I've never experienced this kind of fear. I wasn't afraid when I went to jail back then. I've been to places where I should have been scared: Vietnam, the South, Ku Klux Klan.

Why weren't you scared then?
Denial and the need to push on, which was stronger than worrying. I was afraid sometimes, but courage is a funny thing. It's not because somebody's born courageous — it's because you're willing to do stuff, even if you're scared. To give you an idea of how dark I can get now, my darkest joke is: The good news about climate change is that if it gets us first,

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY LEE STEWART. PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY ETHAN REDFIELD. LIGHTING TECH: KEVIN DORMAN.

JOAN BAEZ

Trump won't have time to build his death camps.

Have you had moments when you've thought everything you and others fought for in the Sixties has been dismantled?
I don't spend a lot of time worrying about the fact that things are sliding backward. Things don't ever stay where you want them to be. Havel's government, Mandela: Those are wonderful, amazing people, and they do this wonderful, amazing stuff, and it lasts sometimes for a good amount of time, and then somebody fucks it up.

We have to remember what's sewn into the fabric of America. I keep picturing the Blacks and whites at the lunch counter in Mississippi. Those were enormous acts of courage, and they changed things, and that's the commitment we need now. So in the midst of this, it feels like torn fabric.

You've sung at a few anti-Trump, pro-democracy rallies. What was it like performing again?
I have a lower register that I refused to accept because I couldn't be my

famous soprano anymore. So, I quit singing. But somewhere in there is the voice. I've dipped into the lower range and have found the songs that work for it.

Which songs can you still sing?
I can make different things work, like "Imagine" and all the Civil Rights songs. "We Shall Overcome" is a beautiful song, but it takes us so far back. There has to be something fresher than that.

We really aren't hearing many new protest songs these days.
I wouldn't want to be a part of a movement without the music, but you're right. What we need is an anthem, but it's impossible to write an anthem. "One in a Million" comes closest, but you can't drag that out of nothing. It has to come from somewhere else. "Imagine" is still so beautiful. The Dylan stuff is still internationally known, and it doesn't have the same sort of thing for me that "We Shall Overcome" does. Way back then, I had the brains to know we were not going to overcome everything and have world peace. Now, it's even more so.

In your poetry collection *When You See My Mother, Ask Her to Dance,* you wrote, in a piece about Dylan, "Who's writing that kind of stuff today, Mister Creator?"
I asked Josh Ritter to write a song, and he wrote one called "I Carry the Flame," which comes closest to a marching, Pete Seeger sort of folk song. I sang it a little at the May 1

demonstration [in Mountain View, California]. But we need more of those, and Janis' "One in a Million."

Have you listened to Jesse Welles, the politically outspoken troubadour from the South?
The young guy. Just amazing. That's going somewhere. Gotta harness that little kid. How old is he?

He's 30. What impressed you about his songs?
It's real. It's just coming out. He's channeling that sort of stuff. It just comes through you. That's what I saw, anyway.

Do you keep up with modern female singer-songwriters?
I listen to whatever my granddaughter sends me. I got to liking Lana Del Rey quite a bit. Chappell Roan I liked. When my son Gabe and Jasmine and I are together, we play Lana and Hozier on a loop on the long trip up and down the coast. I'm friends with Lana. Don't forget to mention my crush on Hozier. Take me to church with that bad boy.

How did you come to know Lana?
Out of the blue, she asked me if I would be interested in singing at her show at the Greek Theatre. And I thought, "Where the fuck is *this* coming from?" I had no idea. I was joking with her and said, "Your audiences are all 16 years old. They don't know me." She said, "Well, they should." That's a risk for a young songwriter, because if they say "*Ta da* — Joan Baez!" one third of their public is not going to know what she's talking about. But they take that risk anyway. Taylor [Swift, who invited Baez onstage in 2015] did the same thing. Some of Lana's-age folks called me "badass," which I thought was fantastic. She's an interesting woman. She's slightly on another planet, but I appreciate that and her and her music.

What's the story behind Lana's mention of you in "Dance Till We Die": "I'm coverin' Joni and dancin' with Joan"?
She came up to hang out, and we had dinner and then went off to this Senegalese club in San Francisco where I've danced for years. She didn't dance. Her sister danced. She was very, very shy, actually, in some ways. I did the dancing for her. She gave me a beautiful necklace, a little gold thing with "Joanie" on it.

A couple of years ago, a mini controversy emerged over "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," the Robbie Robertson song that was one of your biggest hits. Since it was narrated by a white Southerner during the Civil War, some questioned whether it should be rewritten or canceled. What did you make of that?
I was thinking about that this morning when I played "One in a Million" for Karen O'Connor, my director friend. She said, "Let me listen to the words again." I thought, "Jesus, I don't even listen to the words to stuff." It's a feeling, and the feeling with "Dixie" was the same. I didn't know what it was saying. I just thought it was wonderful. It's like the stuff I do in foreign languages. Once I get the syllables down, I don't even know what I'm saying, and it doesn't make any difference.
"Dixie" wasn't in demand, but if somebody wanted to hear it and I felt like singing it, I would have done it. I got to be politically correct in the right place [*smiles*]. I knew at some point somebody was going to make an issue of it. But who cares? Who gives a shit? Wonderful song.

Speaking of protest singers, when did you first hear about a movie called *A Complete Unknown*?
I heard a lot of talk about it. I guess I thought, "I don't know what this is going to be, whether it would be right or a bunch of nonsense." As it moved along, I thought, "People are getting serious about this thing. It's going to be a real movie."

Did anyone from the film or the Dylan camp reach out, especially since you're a character in it?
Are you kidding? I reached out to *them,* to the actors: "Would they like to talk to me?" So, Monica called, and then Ed Norton. They both had long conversations with me. Monica said, "If you like it,

> "We Have to Remember What's Sewn Into the Fabric of America."

please tell me. But don't tell me if you didn't like it." I said, "Listen, if we don't like it, we'll throw popcorn at the screen, but I think we'll probably like it."

So, you didn't hear from Dylan directly?
Come on. You've worked for *Rolling Stone* long enough to know

JOAN BAEZ

the answer to that. [*Goes into Dylan imitation*] "Hey, Joanie, guess what, we're doin' this." Silly question.

What was the experience like seeing it for the first time?
People in my camp, they're outraged, and they're fact-checking. And I said, "Don't bother." It's a fun movie. Certainly got a feeling of the Village, but I never lived in the Village. The only time was that short period of time with Bob. And it wasn't the Chelsea Hotel, it was the Earle. But details, details, see what I mean? Someone said, "Did you really do that to Bob?" [*Flashes a middle finger.*] I said, "No, I did this." [*Flashes both middle fingers.*]

What did they get right about Bob?
Oh, a lot. A lot of the movement, facial movement, talking, even some of the singing. The attitude. I mean, a *bad* attitude.

How about the depiction of you?
Some of the shots from behind of Monica and Dylan look startlingly like me. People said her speaking voice was really [close to mine]. She worked like mad to get it right. She even had this down [*kneads her fingers together*]. Dumb things like my nervous tick. I saw her at a press thing and called her and said, "Is that something you do, or is that something you picked up for me?" And she said she had picked it up from watching me.

Chalamet seemed to get Dylan's own jittery hand gestures.
[*Nods, then bends a thumb far back.*] Bob has a thumb that goes like that. Not everybody's going to have that. Somebody told me that the thumb bent back like that means you're a murderer [*laughs*].

The movie also seemed to make a triangle out of you, Bob, and Suze Rotolo, but historically speaking most of us assumed it all didn't overlap that way.
Well, it wasn't happening in my face. I thought I was after Suze Rotolo, but I don't even know. I didn't ask. Don't ask, don't tell. I think that, from what I've heard, they really didn't do her justice at all. But I'm glad Bobby Neuwirth was in it. And funny old [Albert] Grossman. [Actor Dan Fogler] looked like Grossman.

More than 60 years later, what still fascinates people about you and Bob?
If you look me up and Google me, there's maybe one thing on me, and then it's directly to "Joan Baez and Bob Dylan." I had a great gift the other day. A 23-year-old girl who is an assistant at one of the clinics where I went was just finding out about me. She said, "You're famous!" I said, "Meh … Google me." Then she says [*indicating a photo of Dylan*], "Who's this guy?" And I said, "Thank you." Then I decided to explain who it was. If you're in a room with Bob, anywhere with Bob, you're diminished automatically. But there are worse people to be glued at the hip to.

In a recent interview, you talked about writing Dylan a personal letter that expressed your feelings. Then you sent it to him — but intentionally didn't include a return address nor any way to contact you.
That was about 10 years ago when I wrote that. I was painting him down in my little studio, when he was really, really young. Had to be 21 or something. And I put on a record of his music, and I started to cry. And I cried forever and painted, and it washed it all away. Then it was done. There's no more resentment. I was lucky enough to have him in my life and have those songs and have the voice to sing them. Gratitude was taking the place of frustration and hurt and bullshit.

What did you write?
I just told him exactly what I told you. Very simple.

> "Enjoying Yourself Has Become an Act of Resistance.... We're Supposed to Be Cowering."

It's been six years now since the last show of your farewell tour. Any regrets?
Absolutely not. I didn't know what to expect, because everybody says, "Once you quit, they go back out and go on." Elton [John] said to me, "I just can't wait to be with my kids." And he's back on the road.... I can't remember the first show I saw after I'd quit touring myself. But I thought, "Well, this would be an interesting test." And I didn't miss it, not a bit. It was time. I mean, 10 nights at the Olympia — time to quit. Don't want to go back and do 20 [*laughs*].

Two years ago, you were the subject of a documentary, *I Am a Noise,* in which you revealed you and your sister Mimi had dealt with sexual-abuse issues from your father. What made you go public?
A combination of things. I was 79 when we started the movie, so how about an honest legacy and not make me try to look prettier than I am, or whatever it was? This is a life well-lived. It's interesting how many people have responded, and it's in the same way Trump allows people to be pigs. This [revelation] will allow people to maybe look in their past where they'd have not been willing to look. One woman came up to me and said her mother was seventysomething and had been in tears. She said, "My mother talked about stuff she never talked to me about," meaning that kind of [abuse]. Karen [O'Connor, the film's co-director] would say, "Everybody's got something." And if you can identify your own or give them permission … that was one of the nice results that came from it.

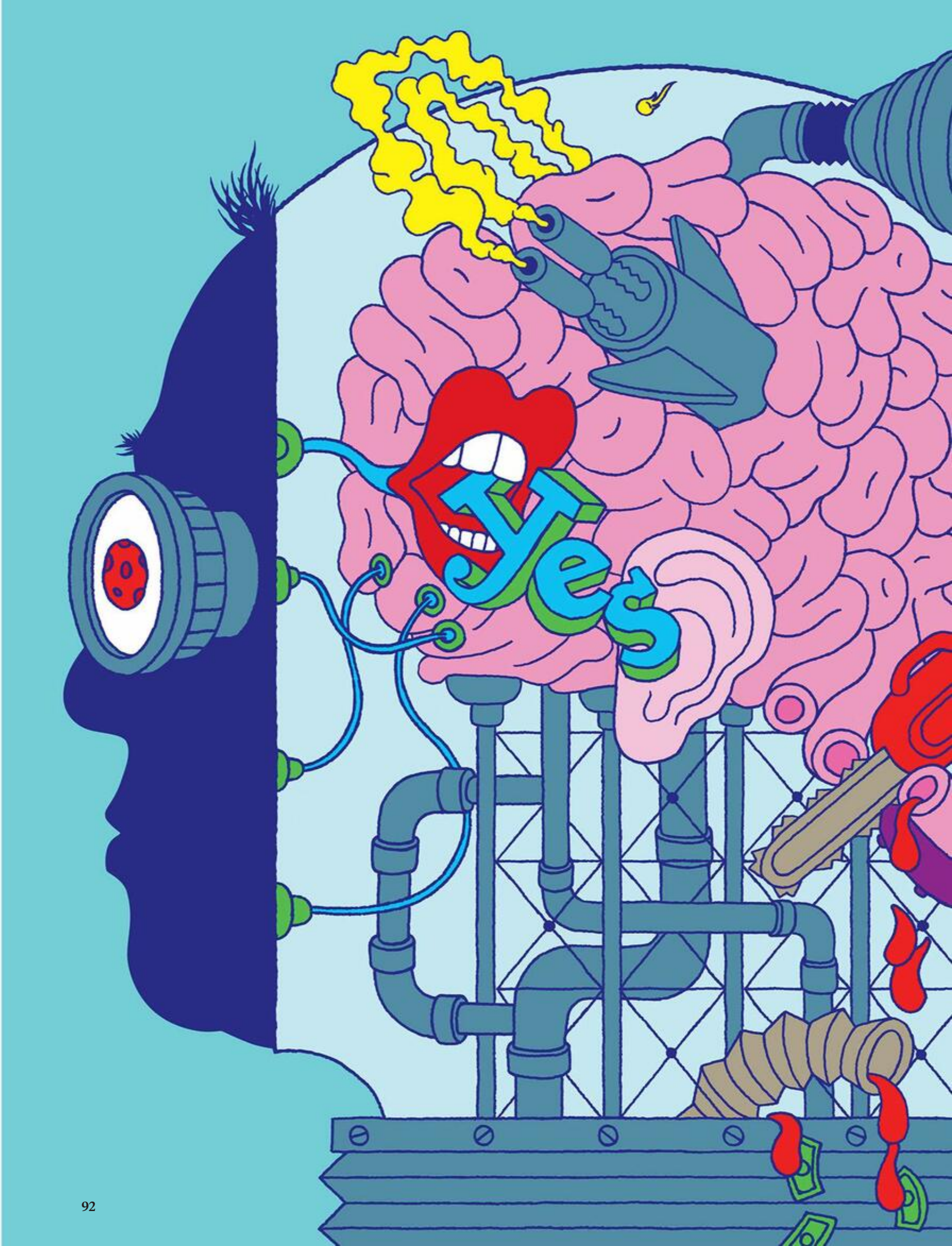
The film also explored your relationship with another woman, Kim Chappell, in the Sixties.
No one paid any attention to that [in the movie]. It's old hat. We certainly weren't going to say anything [in the Sixties]. We thought we were getting away with all this. Now, Jasmine has this friend of hers who just came out as bi, so everybody's having parties. Back when Kim and I were together, you didn't talk about it, but I think that it's almost the opposite. You get to be part of clubs or LGBTQ and women's rights. Now, it's like points.

As the Trump administration moves forward, what do you see as your role in terms of activism?
I think my life will be defined now again by the state of this country in the world. I have encouraged people to not try and sit this one out. They have to go do something.

But I'll tell you my dilemma. In the old days, when I briefly went to jail, they'd give you your meds, they have you make telephone calls. It wasn't a heavy-duty prison, but a lockup. Now, if I'm in that position of civil disobedience, I have a problem encouraging people if I'm not going to go to jail with them. Like most people my age, I would be useless without the medication I take on a regular basis.

What advice do you typically find people ask you for?
It's universal: "What can I do?" My answer is, find something that calls you that's not going to be big-scale. The next time you hear yourself say, "I'm overwhelmed," follow it with "and." "I'm overwhelmed, *and* I need to do something." Even "I'm scared to death, *and* I'm going to have a margarita."

Enjoying yourself has become an act of resistance. Action is the antidote to despair. We're supposed to be cowering. I went to my granddaughter's graduation in Miami, and I ended up dancing with drag queens. I thought, "OK, this is how we do it." You get nuts. Drink a lot. I went to a strip club. That was my statement for the week. Dance with a big, lascivious drag queen and post it. It's good trouble dancing with drag queens, because they want to abolish drag scenes. I'm sure [Trump would] like to abolish *me,* but I hope I will have earned that if it reaches that point. ®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BILLIONAIRES: NOT LIKE US

They have fantasies of going to Mars, transhumanism, and superhuman AI. Turns out what you've suspected is true: The super rich are built differently

By ALEX MORRIS
Illustrations by MELINDA BECK

Like many people alive today, I have no desire to live on Mars. It is, by all accounts, a pretty shitty place for human habitation. Heat escapes its atmosphere so quickly that, were one to stand at its equator at noon with skin exposed — not a great idea! — it would feel like spring to the feet and winter to the head. The thin atmosphere also does little to protect the planet from meteorites and asteroids, which lob themselves into Mars with some regularity. The planet-wide dust storms are so fierce that the debris often does not settle for months at a time. Even Mars' two moons lack the elegance and majesty of Earth's sole one: Phobos and Deimos appear as misshapen potato-like blobs in the sky (to add insult to injury, Phobos is slated to crash into the planet in about 50 million years). And speaking of potatoes, one could not safely grow them with freeze-dried human feces and martian soil, as per the movie *The Martian,* because as appetizing as shit-potatoes may sound, the soil on Mars is toxic. Also, liquid tends to freeze, boil, or evaporate immediately — including human saliva and, presumably, tears. When scientists say they are looking for life on Mars, they mostly do not mean life right now but rather evidence that life existed eons ago, when Mars was possibly warmer and covered with water and not so much of a freaking hellscape of a planet. So: I don't know. I'm not a scientist. But if we can keep things going here on Earth, I think we should.

This thought has come to mind a lot lately, as much has been made of the political wranglings of Earth's richest technocrats, whose ambitions range from lower taxes to interplanetary colonization. Somehow, while we were all thumbing through TikTok or commenting on tweets or working three jobs to (not) be able to afford rent, we allowed the world's richest man to pay roughly $250 million to help reinstall Donald Trump in the White House and then create an unelected position for himself in which he — with a bevy of programmers too young to rent cars from Hertz — slashed government programs, fired nuclear safety workers (then frantically tried to hire them back), and basically treated the infrastructure of the American government like an evil monster in a Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

Meanwhile Elon Musk's old frenemy and PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, the first of the Silicon Valley tycoons to endorse Trump way back in the innocent times of 2016, had paid $15 million to help get his protégé J.D. Vance elected to the Senate, then introduced Vance to Trump at Mar-a-Lago, then somehow helped persuade Trump to make Vance his vice president, which suggests backdoor maneuvering of the highest order considering Trump's misgivings about the man at that particular moment in time.

Now, here we are, an era in which the men of cyber industry — having monopolized goods distribution, security algorithms, internet satellites, social networks, and our attention — have seen fit to attempt a sort of siege on the American government. Is this technofascism? Sure! Should it concern us that power and tech — and the power of tech — are so concentrated in so few hands and that Trump appears to be a Trojan horse for Silicon Valley's most neo-reactionary ambitions? Absolutely! Do we want America remade in the image of a tech startup by men who like to move fast and break things (especially when most of the systems they're breaking are ones that they, in fact, would never rely on)? Not I! But also: What is going on with this idea that humans should even want to live in space? What sort of lack of reality testing are we dealing with here?

"AS YOUR WEALTH INCREASES, YOUR EMPATHY DECREASES," SAYS PSYCHOTHERAPIST CLAY COCKRELL. "IT CAN BE TOXIC."

Musk, whose wealth has lately hovered well over $400 billion, has enough money that he could, should he desire, end world hunger and still have billions to spare. If Jeff Bezos had a mind to, he could eliminate homelessness in America and still be one of the richest people in the world. Yet of the half-dozen tech billionaires Trump displayed like trophies at his inauguration, most seem less concerned with the fate of the common American than they do with a sci-fi fantasy future that involves transhumanism, superhuman AI, and the survival of humanity as an interplanetary species (starting, perhaps, with launching Katy Perry into space). Which, truth be told, seems like more than just a moral failing. It seems ... unhinged? Deranged? Batshit?

At the very least, current circumstances might lead one to wonder: How the heck does someone get this way? And what does it mean for the rest of us?

How the Brains of the Wealthy Are Hardwired Differently

In 2011, a Berkeley grad student named Paul Piff conducted an experiment that has since become famous in the world of social psychology. Over the course of several weekends, Piff and his research team crouched behind bushes at the intersection of Interstate 80 and Lincoln Highway in Berkeley, California. When a vehicle passed, they would catalog it — "five" for a brand-new BMW, for instance; "one" for a beat-up Honda. Then the researchers would observe the behavior of the car's driver.

For centuries, humans have studied and tried to understand our own hierarchies — how and why we arrange ourselves into tribes and nations and by what means certain groups and individuals rise to the top. But Piff had realized that we had little data on how wealth — a prime marker of power in our current times — affects the psychology of those who hold it. "In the U.S., we spend a lot of time pathologizing poverty and valorizing aspects of the rich," he tells me. "I was really interested in the flip side of poverty: If poverty has these effects, then wealth must also, and let's start to try to uncover what those are. There must be some pathologies there too, right?"

What Piff and his team found at that intersection is profound — and profoundly satisfying — in that it offers hard data to back up what intuition and millennia of wisdom (from Aristotle to Edith Wharton) would have us believe: Wealth tends to make people act like assholes, and the more wealth they have, the more of a jerk they tend to be.

At the intersection the researchers were monitoring, drivers of the most expensive cars were roughly four times more likely to cut others off and three times less likely to stop for pedestrians, even when controlling for factors like the driver's perceived gender and amount of traffic at the time they were collecting data.

When someone from the research team posed as a pedestrian heading into the crosswalk, almost half of the grade-five cars failed to stop, as if they didn't even see the person.

"People find the car study infinitely relatable," Piff says now of this research, the results

of which were published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.* "It's almost like science masquerading as allegory, or allegory masquerading as science."

For all the attention it has received, the car study was admittedly small, but other research has backed up its findings — and augmented them. Wealth makes you less generous (lower-income individuals have been shown to give a greater proportion of their income than wealthier ones), less compassionate (people with more money and status report less distress when confronted with another person's suffering), and more narcissistic. In a hilariously pointed study that was also included in the *PNAS* article, people primed to think of themselves as upper-class were more likely to take candy from a jar that they had been told was meant for kids in a nearby lab. In other words, they were more likely to literally steal candy from children.

Yet the Berkeley team wasn't just interested in the correlation between assholery and wealth; it also was interested in causation: Were people with less empathy more likely to become wealthy, or did wealth tend to deprive people of empathy?

To find out, Piff and his colleagues developed experiments in which the participants' status was artificially manipulated — making them feel higher or lower status — to see if there would be a behavioral effect based on that variable alone. In one such experiment, Monopoly players tossed a coin at the beginning of the game to determine who would be given an unfair advantage — starting with twice as much money, collecting twice as much when they passed "go," and rolling two dice at every turn instead of one. The results of the study were never published, but as videos of the experiment show, players with the advantage soon began displaying more dominant behavior, taking up more room at the table, moving their opponent's piece for them, even eating more pretzels from a shared bowl. Other researchers found that simply making subjects think about money (sitting them near a screensaver showing images of bills, for instance) had an antisocial effect: Subjects picked up fewer pencils that an assistant pretended to accidentally drop and arranged a stranger's chair further from their own.

When it came to determining the mechanism behind this antisocial shift, researchers hypothesize that socialization itself is key. Wealthy people tend to have more space, literally and figuratively. They spread themselves out into bigger homes, they send their children to less crowded schools, they interact less with the hoi polloi and even, research has shown, with members of their own social class. And they have less need to: Wealthy people are insulated from relying on the types of pro-social engagement that the rest of us need to survive and thrive in an interconnected world. For them, it does not take a village; it takes a staff.

Turns out, this disengagement can even be quantified. A 2020 study published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* found that wealthy people are less adept at reading other people's facial expressions. Another, published in *Psychological Science* in 2016, used eye trackers to determine that higher-income individuals spend less time looking at others directly, which might explain why they are less able to remember people's faces. Even their physiology changes: A study published in *Emotion* showed that poorer participants experienced a significantly larger deceleration in heart rate — a sign of compassion — when watching videos of kids receiving chemotherapy. In another study, from the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* poorer people who were shown images of suffering exhibited a stronger response in their vagus nerve, which is known to activate emotional sensations. According to Sukhvinder Obhi, a professor of social neuroscience and the director of the Social Brain, Body and Action Lab at McMaster University, having more money tends to suppress or curtail the mirror neuron system, the parts of the brain that light up when you execute an action and when you witness someone else execute that same action, allowing humans to cognitively put themselves in someone else's shoes. "It's giving you a neurophysiological measure of what we've called social attunement," he says. "High status and high power just reduce that activity in the premotor cortex."

Obhi is quick to point out, however, that these effects are not necessarily hardwired: In laboratory settings, at least, efforts to get wealthier study participants to socially engage have proven beneficial. And antisocial tendencies could certainly be influenced or even overruled by other factors that encourage community-mindedness or consideration of the needs of others, which might explain the more radical philanthropy of some billionaires in historically marginalized groups — like Jeff Bezos' ex-wife, MacKenzie Scott — or investor Warren Buffett, who never traded in the fairly modest house he purchased in 1958 for an isolated mansion, and continues to drive his 2014 Cadillac XTS through the McDonald's drive-through for lunch. Buffett, appropriately, has been dubbed "the conscience of capitalism."

If left unchecked, however, wealth-related disengagement seems to not be so great for a species for which pro-social cooperation is programmed into our hunter-gatherer DNA. Clay Cockrell, a psychotherapist who caters to ultra-high-net-worth individuals, tells me he thinks of great wealth as subtractive: It doesn't really add to one's happiness, but it does take away struggles that can make someone unhappy. Yet it's subtractive in a different sense, too — contributing to isolation, paranoia, grandiosity, and risk-taking behavior, as well as a pronounced lack of empathy. "As your wealth increases, your empathy decreases. Your ability to relate to other people who are not like you decreases.... It can be very toxic."

Social psychologist Michael Kraus, who participated in much of the Berkeley research with Piff, puts it even more pointedly: "You come to this idea that all of your thoughts and feelings matter, all your ways of interpreting the world matters, and everybody else is just kind of noise.... You just don't care."

History Repeats — and Only the 'Fittest' Survive

For much of recent American history, the social contract necessitated that the wealthiest Americans had to at least pretend to care.

The OG robber barons of the Gilded Age had found themselves confronted with a sociological — and psychological — situation that was distinct from that of most extremely wealthy people who had come before them. They did not head up armies. They were not divinely anointed. They were not manor born. They derived their power from money — and money alone — and the amount of money they had was basically unthinkable.

According to historian David Nasaw, who has written biographies of Andrew Carnegie, William Randolph Hearst, and Joseph P. Kennedy, "This new species of rich men needed some rationale, some moral justification for the accumulation of this wealth. They needed, in a very visceral, intimate sense, a sign that their wealth was not a matter of chance or crime or robbery, that they

were not simply robber barons, but that what they were doing was beneficial to all of mankind."

Some of these men found such a justification in social Darwinism and the ideas of Herbert Spencer, a 19th-century psychologist and anthropologist who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" not to explain biological evolution but rather to legitimize social hierarchies: Rich and powerful people are rich and powerful because they have innate traits that make them superior. Never mind the effects of systemic oppression (Spencer was an unapologetic racist) or the fact that, in a functioning democracy, no billionaire is entirely "self-made" (where would Bezos be without taxpayers paving the roads his Amazon trucks clog?) — historians today see a direct line from the social Darwinism of the Gilded Age to DOGE. "[With] tech leadership nowadays, I think the arguments are a little different: They don't make explicit appeals to survival of the fittest," says Luke Winslow, author of *Oligarchy in America*. "But you get phrases like 'make the world a better place' and 'move fast and break things.' Well, that's very Darwinian, because if you break things, if you have disruption, catastrophe, the hope is that the strong will survive. You don't have this crutch of a government allowing the losers and the weaklings to survive; you'll weed them out. And this idea is really big in Silicon Valley, this justification of the concentration of wealth and power based on this idea that they deserve it. How do you know they deserved it? Well, geez, look at how rich Elon Musk is."

In a certain sense, it's easy to buy into this (flawed) logic to one degree or another. Even plebeians can take comfort in the idea that there is justice in the world, that people get what they deserve, despite obvious and requent proof to the contrary. But psychologists have found that wealthier people are significantly more likely to believe in nature over nurture, to think that traits are ingrained and immutable. And, surrounded by yes-men who don't call them on their bullshit, they are also more likely to have an inflated sense of their own abilities, to overstate the power of the traits they possess. While observations of the rigged Monopoly game proved informative, for instance, the Berkeley researchers noticed that the strangest thing actually happened after the game was over: When the "rich" players were asked why they'd won, they didn't tend to mention the random coin toss that had given them the obvious advantage; they tended to credit their own abilities, the good, strategic choices they'd made. Even knowing that the game was rigged, they thought they'd earned, and therefore deserved, their victory.

For someone with mega billions, this type of self-delusion could become mega pronounced. "These guys think they're Superman, that they're genetically endowed with superior characteristics, and that their genes should populate the Earth," says Dartmouth sociology professor Brooke Harrington, who studies the ultra-rich and has helped popularize the term "broligarchy." As Harrington points out, the messaging is pretty overt, from venture capitalist Marc Andreessen's 2023 "Techno-Optimist Manifesto" — which talked up such things as "becoming technological supermen" and "conquering dragons" — to Thiel's obsession with living forever and the fact that he named his data-mining company Palantir, after the far-seeing crystals in *The Lord of the Rings*. Then there's Musk's "breeding farm," as Harrington puts it, and his edgelord displays of dominance, like brandishing a chain saw at this year's Conservative Political Action Conference or doing what many perceived to be a Nazi salute at Trump's post-inauguration rally. Using his preferred form of social engagement, Musk recently reposted on X an argument that "a Republic of high status males is best for decision making." "Interesting observation," he commented, as if one could actually observe something that is patently untrue. (For what it's worth, I reached out to Musk, Thiel, Bezos, and Andreessen, none of whom responded.)

"THESE GUYS THINK THEY'RE SUPERMAN," SAYS SOCIOLOGY PROFESSOR BROOKE HARRINGTON.

Naturally, this grandiosity also extends to the tech elite's accelerationist agenda. Musk believes that in 20 years — and thanks to his own genius — a million humans will be living on Mars. (Never mind that his budget-travel version of spaceships keep exploding.) Bezos wants humanity spread throughout the solar system on enormous space stations (that a galactic Amazon presumably stocks). And Silicon Valley is steeped in the idea that all of this will come about thanks to the imminent arrival of artificial general intelligence (AGI), a point at which artificial intelligence equals that of humans and then iterates upon itself, growing exponentially more brilliant with every version. Once we reach this singularity — and assuming that the tech is aligned with the forces of good and not evil — we can rely on AI to solve any problem, from reversing aging to curtailing climate change to colonizing space so that humanity's growth is not limited by the resources on just this measly planet Earth.

Which means that, when it comes to noblesse oblige, such as it were, we have in fact entered a new frontier. A Gilded Age oligarch who exploited his workers or cheated his customers might build a library or concert hall or train station to burnish his image. Now, the technocrats have framed their contribution as an algorithmically guaranteed utopia that will bring about the salvation of mankind. The concern is not with the general welfare of humans who are alive today (those forlorn Amazon drivers peeing in bottles) but rather with the potential future happiness of trillions of potential future humans, spread joyously throughout the cosmos — the offspring of those wealthy enough to afford a ticket off planet Earth. (Musk has said that he hopes to get the cost of a ticket to Mars below $500,000, though in 2020, it cost $3 billion to send one rover, one tiny helicopter, and zero people to the planet.) Such thinking not only reduces every problem to one that can be solved with technology, but it also casts the growth of the technocrats' businesses as a moral imperative, while implying that those who question their "genius" are enemies of not just progress but of all humankind.

And that, in turn, explains much of what has recently happened in America's particular corner of the cosmos. The hubris of extreme wealth might once have aligned itself with views of American exceptionalism; and, indeed, to the extent that Trump's populism could ever mesh with the libertarian vein of Silicon Valley, it's because of their shared strongman vibe. But as their wealth has grown, the tech right's long-standing opposition to government

regulation has shifted — publicly — toward a more extreme, neo-reactionionary, and anti-democratic frame of mind. Why should the "fittest" men submit themselves to taxes, regulation, DEI accountability? Why shouldn't they be the ones in charge, if not here in America then in their floating island "network states" or on their interplanetary colonies? And if pesky government interference threatens the development of the miraculous tech that will allow these things to come to pass, why shouldn't the American government be bought, infiltrated, and managed just like a tech startup, with total corporate control and the "fittest" guys at the top of the roster?

"This is an extremist ideological movement that sees democracy as outdated, and it's amazing how much they talk about it," says Gil Duran, a former editor of *The Sacramento Bee* whose Substack, "The Nerd Reich," has painstakingly drawn connections between certain antidemocratic ideas and the would-be kings in tech who seem taken with them. Duran has particularly highlighted tech's embrace of people like Curtis Yarvin, a once-obscure programmer now famous for his assertion that America suffers from "chronic kinglessness" and that we should "get over [our] dictator-phobia" and submit to a CEO-in-chief who would govern like a "joint-stock corporation without regard to the residents' opinions" (Yarvin has floated Andreessen as a possible man for the job). Thiel, who once famously defended his contention that democracy has not been served by granting women the vote, had Yarvin to his home to watch the 2016 election results (Yarvin has said that he's "coaching Thiel" and that he is "fully enlightened"). Both Thiel and Andreessen have, through their companies, invested in Yarvin's software startup, Tlon. In a 2021 interview with a right-wing podcast, J.D. Vance name-checked Yarvin and seemed inspired by his proposal for "rebooting" the government with a program called RAGE (Retire All Government Employees) that many see as a clear preview of Trump and Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). The weekend of Trump's inauguration, Yarvin dined with Michael Anton, now a senior member of Trump's State Department. "It was when Vance got on the ticket," says Duran, "that it suddenly escalated to: This shit's going into the White House."

As Harrington sees it, that was the next logical move once the tech elite had enough money to pull it off. "The broligarchs believe they are entitled to own everything and rule everything," she says. "If your goal is to own everything worldwide, if that is actually your ketamine-addled goal, then you need to destroy any institution that has the power to hold you accountable. Buying the U.S. government is a brilliant strategy: 'Fuck democracy. We own it, we bought it, and we're running it the way we want.'" (Musk has recently denied reports about his frequent ketamine use.)

"P.S.," Harrington wrote to me shortly after our interview. "I hope that I'm completely wrong about the broligarchs and their aims. I've never hoped so hard to be wrong."

'It's About Control'

One sunny day this spring, on the floor of a building so high above Manhattan that helicopters occasionally fly by below us, I meet a man wearing a suit and glasses and an unreadable expression. We sit together at a long table, the man's back to floor-to-ceiling glass and a peerless blue sky. For decades, this man has worked among the right-wing elite. "If I wrote Peter Thiel right now, he would write me back," he tells me. "I met J.D. Vance at Peter's house — the one in the Bay Area, before he moved to L.A."

In measured tones, this man confirms Harrington's fears. He tells me that the tech billionaires he knows are in fact staging a sort of siege on the American government, building what he calls "a new techno-feudalism in which there's a patchwork quilt of these billionaires who can deliver everything that society needs."

"The money isn't the goal here, right?" he says. "Everybody tries to make it about the money. That's not what it's about. It's about socialization and control.... They would like to see an end to democratic liberalism and constitutional republics.... They view laws not as laws, but as conventions meant to be disrupted in an attempt to right the ship." It's not a conspiracy — "They don't have the alliances, they're not coordinated," the man states. But he is adamant that the wealthiest men in the world are often motivated by a certain set of "core principles": Liberal democracy is weak and ineffectual; the wealthiest tech titans know best; nothing and no one should be allowed to stand in their way. "Everything to them is a structure to optimize," the man in the tower tells me. "The psychology of I-think-I-should-be-in-charge is the original factory setting for anybody who is at that level of wealth. I just think the difference is between people who do it well and people who do it poorly."

Suffice it to say the technocrats are doing it pretty poorly, if one's concern is the plight of the common man alive on Earth, today. But, as it happens, they are also doing it pretty poorly if one's concerns happen to include physics, AI engineering, and the laws of science.

"Musk talks about Mars as a lifeboat for humanity, which is among the very stupidest things that someone could say," says Adam Becker, an astrophysicist and author of the book *More Everything Forever,* which outlines the messianic, sci-fi fantasies of the tech oligarchs. "There are so many reasons why it's such a bad idea, and this is not about, 'Oh, we'll never have the technology to live on Mars.' That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that Earth is always going to be a better option no matter what happens to Earth. Like, we could get hit with an asteroid the size of the one that killed off the dinosaurs, and Earth would still be more habitable. We could explode every single nuclear weapon, and Earth would still be more habitable. We could have the worst-case scenario for climate change, and Earth would still be more habitable. Any cursory examination of any of the facts about Mars makes it very clear."

Then again, you don't have to do a cursory examination of the facts of Mars if you believe tech is close to inventing a machine that can change the physical properties of the universe. In 2023, billionaire OpenAI CEO Sam Altman conceded that climate change was a huge problem, but brushed off its hugeness with the contention that super intelligent AI would soon be able to tell us how to make a lot of clean-energy facilities, how to amp up carbon capture, and how to do both of those things quickly and at scale. "What he said was, 'A good way to solve global warming is to build a kind of machine without a clear definition that no one knows how to build, and then ask it for three wishes,'" Becker says with a sigh.

According to some who work in the field of AI, that's more than just wishful thinking. "I can't believe I even have to talk about these people. That's how ridiculous it is," says Timnit Gebru, an electrical engineer and founder and executive director of the Distributed AI Research Insti-

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EVERYBODY LOVES MEG

Hacks breakout Megan Stalter has her first lead role, in the Netflix series *Too Much* — and true to form, plays it to the hilt

By ANNA PEELE
Photographs by ERIK CARTER

eg Stalter was fighting in a hot tub. She had come to a water park in Wisconsin to relax between stops on her comedy tour, which was styled as a series of fake rallies for a rich, famous, and clueless person running for president. (I know this is a difficult political scenario to imagine, but please stay with me.) While Stalter soaked, she became enraged by a group of hot-tub dwellers who were not embodying what she considered to be the spirit of the aquatic center, and she began screaming back and forth with them. "Wow, you seem like a lot of fun," Stalter yelled, informing them that there were three other sections of the park they could move to if they had a problem with this particular one. Then she stood up, said, "You know what? I'm going to show you that if you don't like to be around someone, you get up and leave," turned, and banged her head on the wall.

This is probably tracking for those who know Stalter from her live performances, or *Hacks,* on which she plays the indefatigably clueless nepo-agent Kayla, or Stalter's Instagram, which showcases her myriad well-meaning, clueless characters, such as the personification of a business attempting to project allyship to the LQBTQIA+ community. ("Hi, gay! Happy Pride Month. We are sashaying away with deals.") These talents are deployed to great effect on *Too Much* (July 10), the new Netflix series from married co-creators Lena Dunham and Luis Felber, in which Stalter plays a fictionalized version of Dunham, a voice of a clueless generation.

But Meg Stalter is not so much clueless as compassionately guileless. See, she was at the water park with her girlfriend, and there was a tiny child swimming alone in the hot tub. Some adults started sticking their arms out and pushing the boy away so he couldn't enter "their area" because he was allegedly "scratching and splashing." (At an all-ages water park, this seems like a barrier of entry.) When Stalter told them they could not touch another person's kid but could feel free to steep elsewhere in the massive facility, the man in the group started cursing at her. And then she was so upset, actually shaking with anger as she went to go find the little boy's parents, that she clonked her skull in front of those assholes. "It was so embarrassing," Stalter says. "It was, like, out of a movie."

Stalter's protective instincts for the innocent extend to her own inner child, who is close enough to the surface as to be visible; her grooming tends toward pigtails and the kind of glittery makeup job one applies after receiving a fully stocked Caboodles makeup kit from Santa. Today, sitting in the empty audience of her favorite Los Angeles performance spot, Largo, before it opens, Stalter is wearing Hello Kitty Crocs and a one-shoulder dress in Lisa Frank-lite pastels. When we greet each other, she gives me tangerines she'd picked the day before on a trip to a farm with her girlfriend. The produce bag is sweetly tied with a sextuple-looped yellow ribbon.

In person, with her comedic cutie-brat persona tucked away, Stalter is earnest and vulnerable, frequently invoking the importance of her faith. "I'm very, like, a God girl," she says. "So I believe that God has a plan for me, and if something happens, then he'll have another plan." Stalter is also, against all evidence, quite soft-spoken. "If I was in a store and someone shushed me in a scary way, that would affect me," Stalter says. "If someone was mean to me, I could feel like the little girl. 'Why would they be mean to her?'"

During Stalter's childhood in Ohio, they were mean to her. After graduating from Catholic elementary school, she attended civilian middle school and struggled to understand why everyone wasn't friends. The popular girls "tortured" her, she says. In an effort to facilitate the missing camaraderie, Stalter invited everyone to a Hawaiian-themed party at her house. She discovered invitations she'd lovingly handed out tossed in the trash at school. Two people wound up attending.

Stalter's mom was (perhaps unsurprisingly) an early ally. She found Stalter funny for the things she still perceives to be true about herself: being "embarrassing or nervous and confident at the same time." Stalter would do interpretive dances on the sidewalk; the joke was that her mom was the only one who knew she wasn't crazy.

That tension of not everyone getting it is Stalter's comedic modus operandi. She recalls a show at the Laugh Factory in Chicago, before she was famous, where the audience was full of drunk tourists — and a lone friend of Stalter's. She had a bit where she would take the stage with blood pouring out of her mouth and open by saying, "Sorry if my mouth bleeds tonight. My mouth bleeds when I get nervous, but I think I'm OK tonight." The only person who laughed at that show, and hysterically, was her buddy. It was a great night.

"It's fun if it's even just one person," she says of connecting with an audience. "And sometimes that could be me."

When she performs, Stalter says, "It's something that comes over me like a trance. One of my best friends, [*Saturday Night Live* star] Sarah Sherman, told me that when she does stand-up, it feels like meditation. And I was like, 'Oh, my God. It feels like that.'" Stalter says when she's performed with a headache, she stops feeling it until she leaves the stage. "I think that's when [I know] I'm meant to do that," Stalter says. Any pain goes away while she enacts God's purpose for her.

"PERFORMING, SOMETHING COMES OVER ME LIKE A TRANCE. THAT'S WHEN I KNOW I'M MEANT TO DO IT."

In *Too Much,* Stalter's Jessica is a celebration of the show's title. The character is caught between a manic id fueled equally by a painful breakup and the lust of new love, and the debilitating superego induced by the same life events. Jess records a series of videos she doesn't intend to release, directly addressing the woman her ex is now engaged to (played by the comically hot Emily Ratajkowski), and whips herself into self-sabotage by questioning her new relationship with Felix (Will Sharpe of *The White Lotus* Season Two fame), who is loosely based on Felber. Any time you fear things are getting unsustainably tumultuous, you need only remind yourself that every episode is a play on the title of a famous rom-com (e.g., "Notting Kill") and that its creators are now happily married enough to want to work together.

The show gives Stalter her first major leading role. She is perhaps the only person besides Dunham who could have played it, which is why Dunham wrote it for her.

Andrew Scott, who also appears in *Too Much,* introduced Dunham to Stalter's work. Dunham says he'd shown her Meg's videos "in the heart of Covid and said, 'Do you know this girl? She's your sister.'" (Dunham does play Stalter's onscreen sister, hilariously despondent after her husband decides to explore bisexuality and polyamory while she languishes in a series of increasingly sedentary supine positions.) "I became totally transfixed," Dunham says. "Someone whose characters operate on the edge of delusional, on the edge of cringe, but is always ultimately in on the joke — that, to me, is my comedy DNA." Dunham cites the characters David Brent on the U.K. *Office,* Patsy and Edina on *Absolutely Fabulous,* and Valerie Cherish of *The Comeback* as Stalter's fictional ancestors.

Around 2022, Dunham DM'd Stalter on Instagram and said she had a project in mind. Stalter was a mega *Girls* fan and had felt a kinship with Dunham through the screen. "I'd connect to this person," she'd thought about a hypothetical but unlikely future meeting while watching Dunham play Hannah Horvath, the series' divisive protagonist.

When Stalter and Dunham got on Zoom, Stalter's instinct was confirmed. Dunham had made a deck of the show — kind of a mood board/game plan for a television series — and there were photos of Stalter on it as the main character. Then Dunham told Stalter, "*Girls* was about sex, and this is about love." It was kismet; Stalter had met her now-partner only

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FLYING SOLO
Stalter as Jessica in *Too Much*, embarking on a move to London with her hairless dog.

four months earlier and refers to her this way: "No one's perfect except for my girlfriend."

"We're very different, just like Lena and Luis," Stalter says. "When me and Lena first talked, we were bonding over that. I feel like I'm the Lena, and I'm the one bringing home a *thing*."

Stalter is referring to the chaos of her life, but sometimes the "thing" is literal. Imagining a conversation between Felber and Dunham, Stalter riffs, "She could be like, 'Honey, I bought a pig today.' And then he's like [*affectionately*], 'Oh, Lena.'" Working with the couple proved the premise of the show. "It just feels like Luis fully lets Lena, and Lena lets Luis, be exactly who they are," Stalter says. "I think sometimes you could be with someone who likes all the differences."

In her own menagerie, Stalter currently has two cats — one rather more aloof, and one hairless snuggler named Suki — and a dog called Bunny, who manages an anxiety disorder with medication and as much physical contact with Stalter as possible. On *Too Much,* Jess, like Dunham, has a bald dog, procured after giving up a rescue (in this case named Cutesie) because of behavioral issues.

In 2017, Dunham went through several heinous press cycles, including one around the saga of her and then-partner Jack Antonoff's real-life dog, Lamby, whom they surrendered to a canine rehabilitation center after multiple instances of aggression. In *Too Much,* Jess' boyfriend forces her to "get rid" of their dog after it nearly bites someone. It's one of many moments that invite a close read, especially in the context of Dunham's autobiographical pieces of writing about her wrenching breakup with Antonoff and her subsequent move to London — the city where Stalter's character decamps after the end of a relationship with a Jewish ex-boyfriend.

"People love when they see something and they're like, 'Is that from that person's real life?'" Stalter says. "Even if it's not all factual or it's not literally a biography, someone so open about sharing their real experiences or at least putting them into certain characters, it's really beautiful, because we get to learn about her. That's why when I saw *Girls*, even though [Lena is] not Hannah, there's parts of her in her stuff. That's the most beautiful thing to see, someone who's putting their heart and energy into something and you get to learn about them — but then you're not taking everything that happened as truth."

At the precipice of her highest-profile role yet, Stalter is contemplating what the project might mean for nonconsensual probing into her own life. People watching her videos is fine, because she has complete control over them, and people are seeing them in their homes. When audiences come to her stand-up shows, well, that's what she's always wanted, and the work is begetting fans who want to see more work. "It feels contained or something," Stalter says. "And then with *Hacks,* it's been so huge and life-changing. But in my mind, I could be safe because I'm not the lead in it.

"Lena is someone I've been such a huge fan of, so it was really crazy to wrap my mind around being in the show," Stalter says slowly. "But then when I got to know her, she felt like a sister and a friend. So now the show feels like a play that we did for each other, and that this really contains a special thing."

Sharpe remembers filming an episode — one of the best of the series — that takes place over one night, in Stalter's character's apartment. The couple has had sex too many times, and Sharpe's character has hit his refractory limit. Sharpe's line after aborting the encounter was supposed to be something like, "I'm in my thirties, queen. I'm all out." After an exhausting day of filming, it came out, in a posh accent, as, "That's me done for the evening, I'm afraid." Stalter named this imaginary interloping gentleman "the Midnight Man," and pointed out every time Sharpe strayed into Midnight Man territory during production. Then she made him a shirt with the moniker on it. "Because of the energy of Lena — and Meg, in particular — it put you in quite a positive, hopeful, loving mindset," Sharpe says of shooting the series. "Just seeing the best in everything and in everyone."

The setting allowed Stalter the confidence and space to play a role that both exercises her obvious comedic virtuosity and shows previously untapped dramatic ability, from dealing with insecurity (not a state expressed by a typical Stalter character) to a breakdown during a breakup. "Some of the stuff that's in the show I feel is like, *Oh! Nobody would ever see me do this if it wasn't on TV,*" Stalter says. "When you're crying in your room alone, people don't see that unless it's on TV. I'm really crying."

Embodying what Dunham describes as Stalter's "incredible mix of warm/fuzzy and boundaried strength," Stalter explains how she approached fictional sex with the advice of intimacy coordinator Miriam Lucia: "During kissing scenes or during vulnerable stuff, it's not actually you, and you don't have to do it the way you do, because you can save that part for yourself." As for Stalter's corporeal being — beautifully showcased on a series in which her character is implicitly contrasted with one played by an actual supermodel — she says, "I'm very about taking care of my body and being healthy, but I have not wanted to be skinny or lose weight for cosmetic reasons since high school." A beacon for us all.

To make public the kind of deeply personal moments fostered by Dunham's writing is, by definition, exposing. "It just feels really vulnerable," Stalter says. "It's hard or strange to think of it being on such a huge platform. It's exciting … but also, just, Netflix is so big."

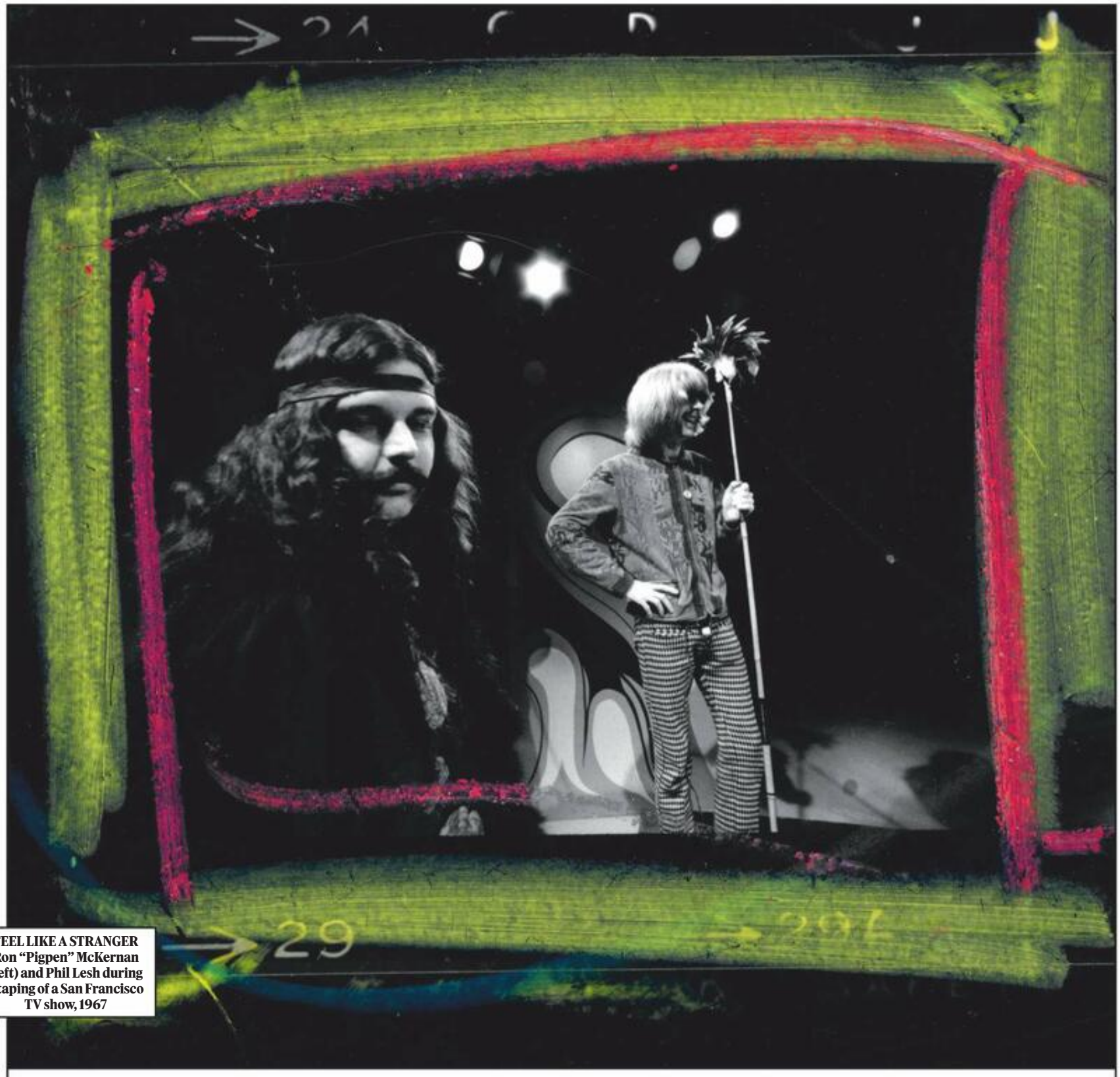
Stalter points to her career-long luck of collaborating with people like Dunham and the *Hacks* team. "I've not worked with evil people," she says. "I don't know how." But she also considers the world this project is opening her up to. "I think there is power in Hollywood that is gross," she says. "There's a lot of darkness in the industry, and things that can corrupt you, like money and power."

Stalter isn't particularly concerned. "I feel so connected to God and grounded that I feel like I would not get swept up by anything in Hollywood," she says.

Stalter sees herself representing — in her life, in a movie she's developing called *Church Girls,* and in the "evil, crazy, weird villain" version of herself she plays onstage — people like her, who grew up with God in places like the Midwest, and who maybe didn't finish college either. "Their lives are just as big as ours," she says, finally daring to group herself in with her famous peers.

"I'm always going to be sensitive," Stalter says. "I am still that little girl in middle school being like, 'Why don't they want to come to the Hawaiian party?' But it's like, there've been so many other parties."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PRODUCED BY PATRICIA BILOTTI AT PBNY PRODUCTIONS. STYLED BY KAT TYPALDOS. HAIR BY ERICKA VERRETT AT A-FRAME USING ROZ. MAKEUP BY MELISSA HERNANDEZ AT A-FRAME USING HAUS LABS. OUTFIT BY REFORMATION. SCARF BY MADS ALLEN. JEWELRY BY LOREN STEWART. PHOTO ASSISTANTS: SCOTT TURNER AND SANDRA RIVERA. STYLING ASSISTANT: LYDIA GINGRICH. PHOTOGRAPHED AT DUST STUDIOS. THIS PAGE: ANA BLUMENKRON/NETFLIX.



FEEL LIKE A STRANGER Ron "Pigpen" McKernan (left) and Phil Lesh during a taping of a San Francisco TV show, 1967

THE UNSEEN GRATEFUL DEAD

A new collection from photographer Jim Marshall takes us inside the Dead's world like never before

By DAVID BROWNE

In a career immersed in rock & roll photography, the late Jim Marshall was long associated with certain iconic images: Johnny Cash flashing his middle finger at San Quentin, Bob Dylan and Suze Rotolo walking the streets of Greenwich Village, Jimi Hendrix thrusting his left arm out during his soundcheck for Monterey Pop.

But Marshall's ongoing documentation of the Grateful Dead embodied a unique bond between photographer and subject. Marshall, who moved back to his native San Francisco in 1964 after two years in New York, met the band soon after it formed. Since he rented an apartment on lower Haight Street, he became almost as much a part of their universe as Mountain Girl (Carolyn Garcia), acid king Owsley Stanley III, and promoter Bill Graham. "Because Jim was an established, trusted professional photographer and everyone knew him and his photographs, the Grateful Dead welcomed him into their circles, allowing Jim unfettered access into their world," writes his archivist, Amelia Davis, in her introduction to *The Grateful Dead: Photos and Stories From the Formative Years, 1966-1977,* the first-ever Marshall collection devoted solely to his Dead work. "This is how Jim became part of their family and they became part of his."

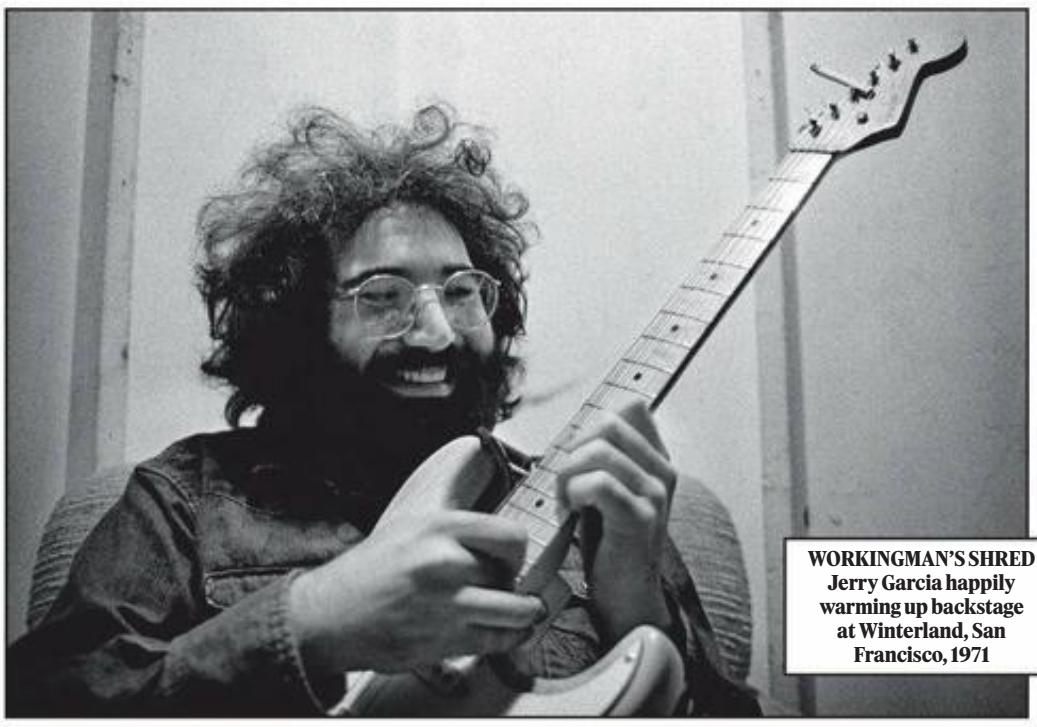
Marshall was known for the way he would immerse himself in whatever situation and gain the trust of his subjects. "I'm afraid to miss anything," he said in a 1980 interview. "It's a compulsiveness. But once I'm there, I want to photograph everything and everybody. I can't stop."

That approach was evident in his Dead archives, which amounted to 52,704 photos, 1,352 proof sheets, and 168 boxes of Kodachrome slides that Marshall left behind when he died in 2010 at 74. In those thousands upon thousands of shots — like those included in *The Grateful Dead,* co-curated by Davis and Dead scholar and musician David Gans — Marshall snapped the band members backstage, onstage, at home, relaxing with their partners, and hanging with fellow musicians.

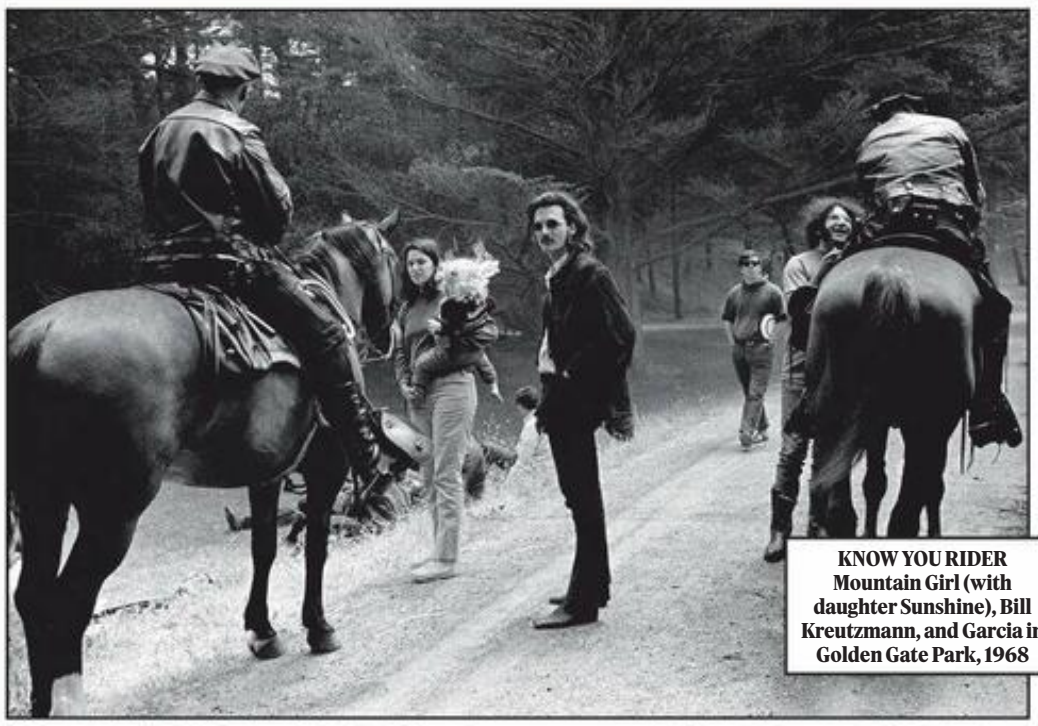
"Part of Jim's genius as a photographer was his ability to capture pure chaos — the chaos of the Dead playing live onstage, going right up to the speakers and getting feedback from them while the others onstage were holding their ears," Davis writes. "But he could also capture quiet and loneliness, as in the photo of Pigpen walking down the street by himself. Two very different images, yet in both, you can feel and see the emotions through Jim's lens."

The Grateful Dead by Jim Marshall: Photos and Stories From the Formative Years, 1966–1977

Here are some of the most revealing — and never-before-seen — images of the Dead included in the book.



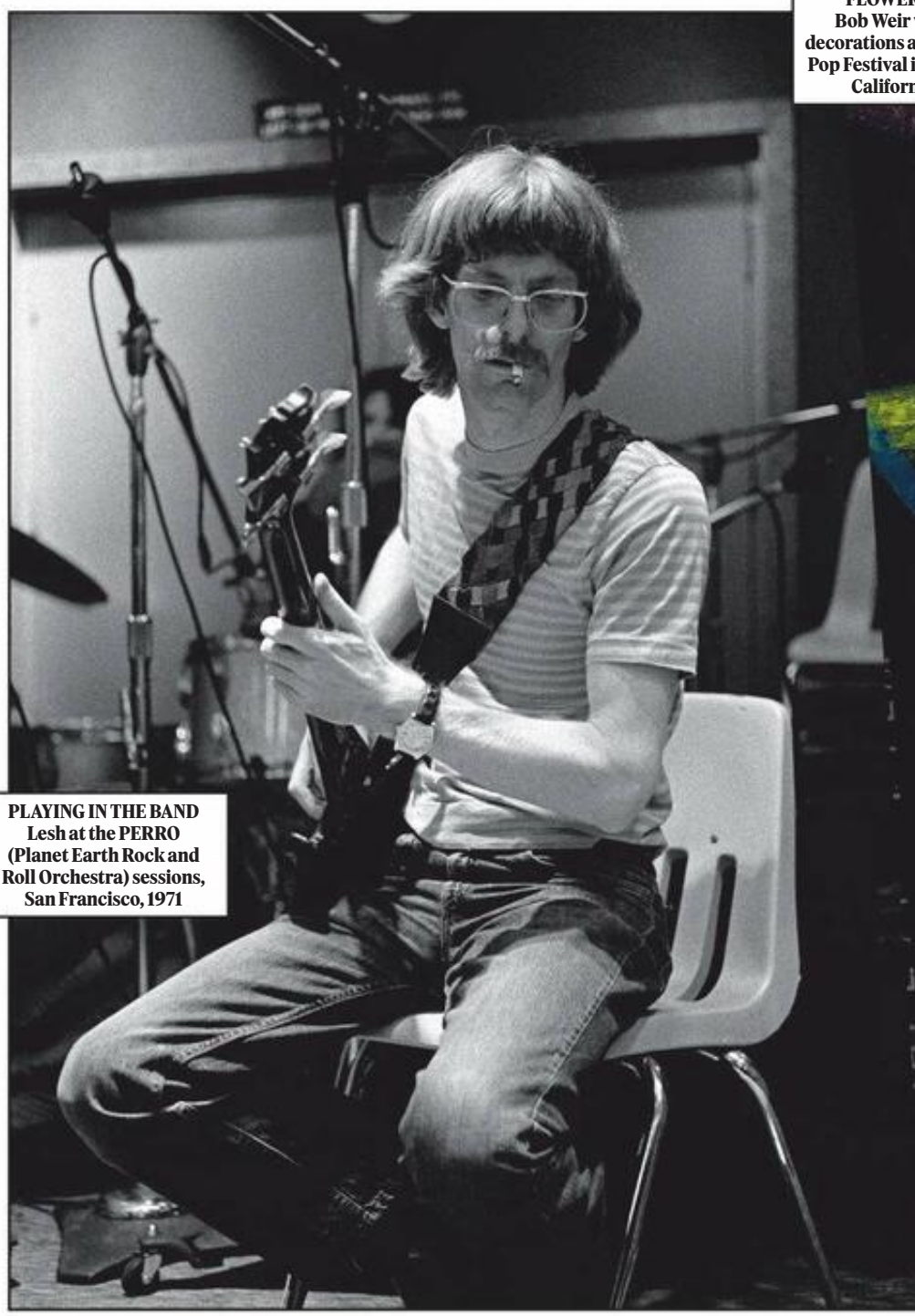
WORKINGMAN'S SHRED
Jerry Garcia happily warming up backstage at Winterland, San Francisco, 1971



KNOW YOU RIDER
Mountain Girl (with daughter Sunshine), Bill Kreutzmann, and Garcia in Golden Gate Park, 1968

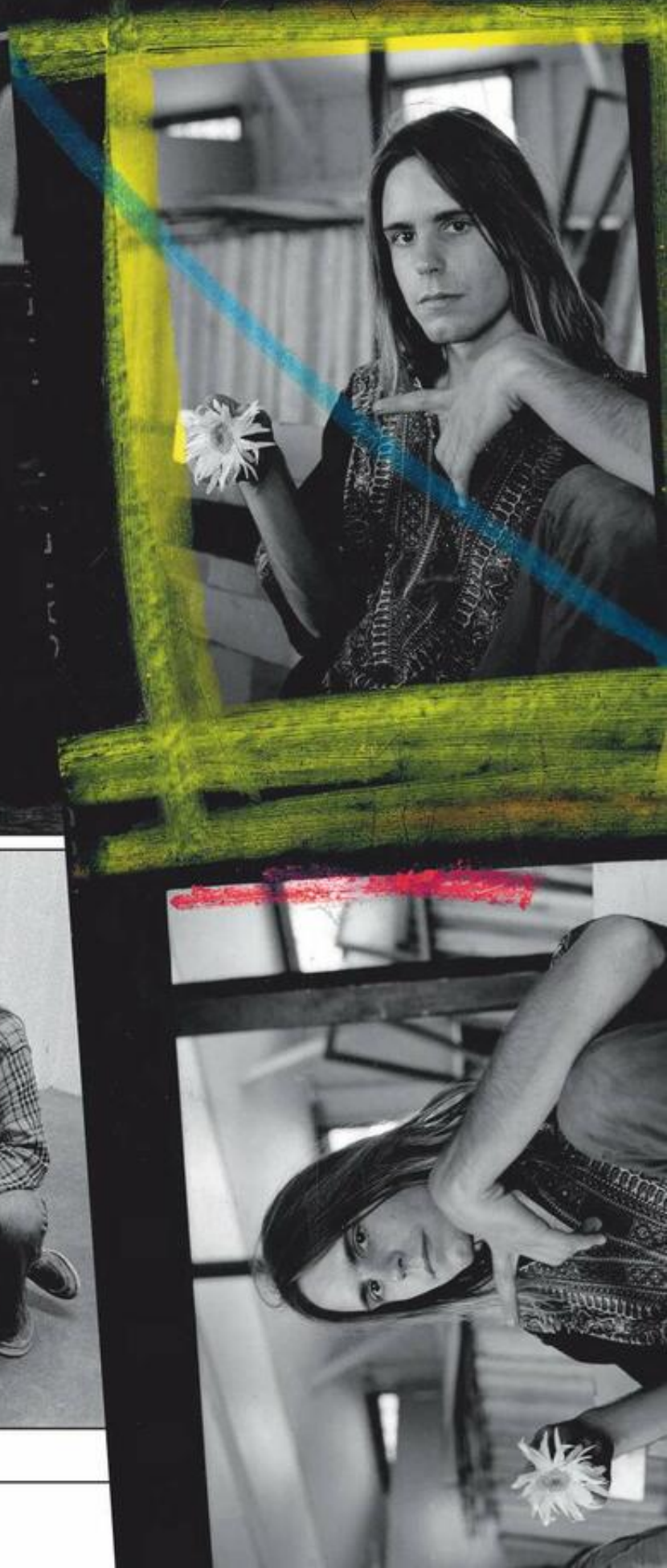
CHEAP THRILLS
Janis Joplin and McKernan cruise a festival in San Jose, California (where she and the Dead performed), 1968

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS ON THIS SPREAD AND ADJACENT SPREAD BY © JIM MARSHALL. EXCERPTED FROM "THE GRATEFUL DEAD BY JIM MARSHALL: PHOTOS AND STORIES FROM THE FORMATIVE YEARS, 1966–1977," PUBLISHED BY CHRONICLE BOOKS 2025

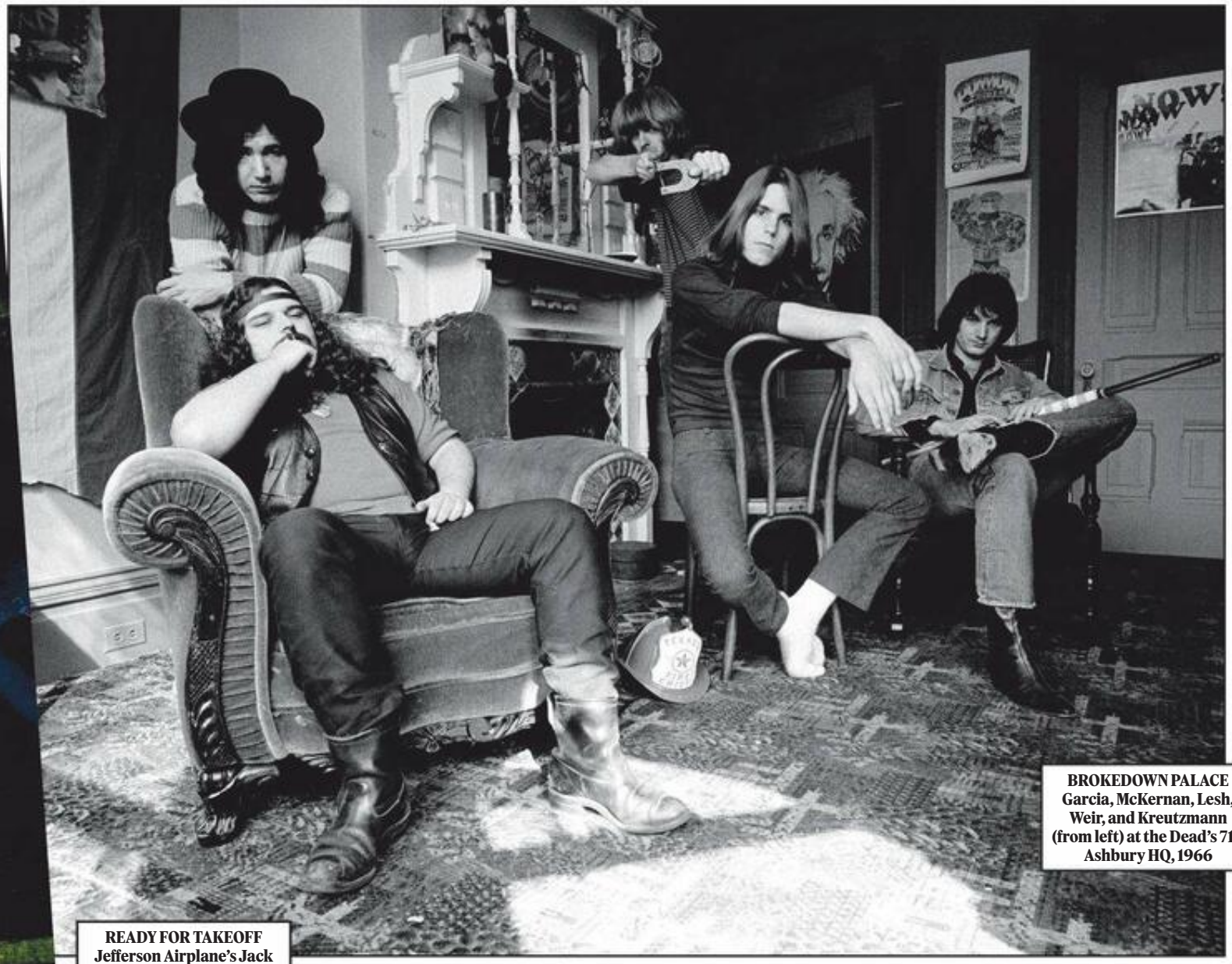


PLAYING IN THE BAND
Lesh at the PERRO (Planet Earth Rock and Roll Orchestra) sessions, San Francisco, 1971

FLOWER POWER
Bob Weir with floral decorations at the Newport Pop Festival in Costa Mesa, California, 1968

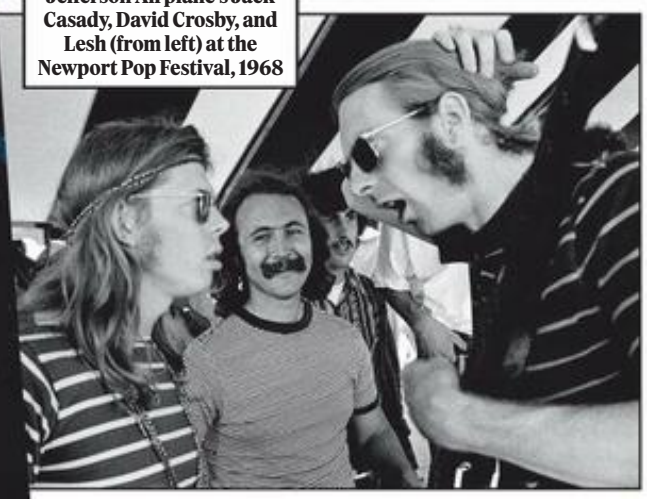


HEARTS OF GOLD
Mountain Girl, Garcia, and Neil Young backstage at a Crosby and Nash show in Los Angeles, 1971

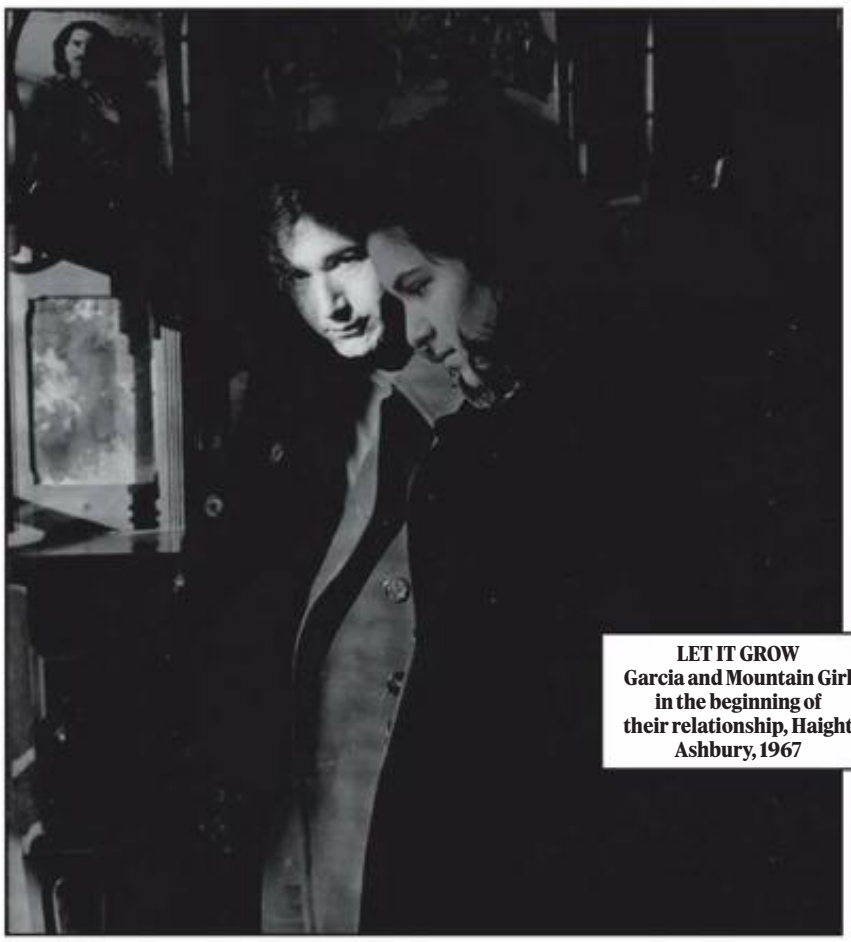


BROKEDOWN PALACE
Garcia, McKernan, Lesh, Weir, and Kreutzmann (from left) at the Dead's 710 Ashbury HQ, 1966

READY FOR TAKEOFF
Jefferson Airplane's Jack Casady, David Crosby, and Lesh (from left) at the Newport Pop Festival, 1968



HIGH TIME
Mickey Hart (left) and Lesh have fun with some new friends in San Francisco, 1969



LET IT GROW
Garcia and Mountain Girl in the beginning of their relationship, Haight Ashbury, 1967

THE HARD TIMES

AND SWEET FREEDOM

OF VYBZ KARTEL

Out of prison after more than a decade, the Jamaican dancehall superstar is ready to reclaim his crown

By NATALIE MEADE • Photographs by DESTINEE CONDISON

It's New Year's Eve, and the roads that lead to Jamaica's National Stadium are filled with food vendors manning their oil-drum grills. Some sell orange bandannas like the pair Vybz Kartel wore when he walked out of the Tower Street Adult Correctional Centre five months earlier, on July 31, 2024. Jamaicans from across the island have taken Knutsford Express buses into Kingston, and foreigners have booked nearly all of the hotel rooms in town to see Freedom Street, Kartel's first concert since 2011.

Inside the open-air arena, which is also home to Jamaica's soccer team and its annual independence ceremony, fans yell above the vuvuzelas. A little after 11 p.m., the house lights go down and Kartel rises up from beneath the stage wearing a gray pinstripe suit with gold trimming made by Solomon's, a Trinidadian tailor. "Yo, yo," he says. Thirty thousand people erupt, and he launches into his opening song: "Mi nuh have time fi nuh jail time, dat a waste time/Mind pon mi money and money pon mi mind."

Kartel has been one of Jamaica's most celebrated entertainers since the early 2000s, when he established himself on the dancehall circuit, recording mixtapes that were shared across the Caribbean. In 2009, he achieved a new level of fame with "Pon de Floor," a collaboration with Diplo's Major Lazer project, and he vaulted even higher when that song was sampled on Beyoncé's hit "Run the World (Girls)," earning him a co-writing credit on one of her signature anthems.

Fifteen years ago, Kartel was one of the country's brightest success stories. He had made it out of the ghetto, crossed over into the mainstream, and represented Portmore, his hometown, at every turn. But in September 2011, he was arrested on a flurry of charges including marijuana possession and homicide. Two and a half years later, he received a life sentence for murdering an associate named Clive "Lizard" Williams. Kartel has always maintained his innocence.

Throughout his career, he has been both celebrated for his poetic style and condemned in Jamaica and other Caribbean countries. Dancehall lyrics are often coded, marked by innuendo. Kartel raised the bar with unapologetic lyrics about sex, hustling, and loyalty, bucking against traditional West Indian respectability rooted in British colonialism. The charges against him stoked his detractors' views that he is a negative influence; some called his comeback show the "Criminal Concert." Even so, his warm welcome at the National Stadium — and at Brooklyn's Barclays Center, where he played his first U.S. shows in 20 years this April — demonstrates his magnetism.

"Talk about a very influential artist, to be locked up for so long, manage to come out, and *still* have the people dem pay attention," Ricky Platinum, a music selector, or DJ, tells me.

Joelle Powe, a filmmaker from Kingston, puts it another way: "He has incredible charisma. He elicits a response as if he was a kind of holy figure."

A week after the show, I meet Kartel at an outdoor lounge in uptown Kingston. He greets me with a jovial air, wearing a long-sleeved Versace button-down with a black skully.

We start talking, but his phone buzzes and dings incessantly. Sidem Öztürk, his fiancée, calls asking where he is. "Come down, babe," he tells her. Then, he takes another call in patois before hanging up. "Let me put di phone deh pon silent."

He tells me that he started his day with a prayer and a spliff. After our conversation, he wants to hit the studio. It's one day until his birthday, and he is oblivious to the surprise party that his team is organizing for tonight. "Tomorrow, I'll be 49," he says. "I used to say 'Ohh, I'll be 20 next week!' But when you're 48, it doesn't sound the same. No. You're like, 'Shit. I'm going to be 49.'"

His motivations to host Freedom Street were layered. More than anything, he felt he had to prove a point: "If you want me to jump the wall, just say I can't do it." He also needed to thank his fans for their loyalty. The typical energy exchange between the entertainer and the audience had been obstructed by prison walls for almost 13 years. "The show was crazy," he says. "I'm coming up from underneath the stage like Michael Jackson, and the whole place inna turmoil."

Kartel tells me that he felt he was in "justice purgatory" during the murder trial, which began in the fall of 2013. He was found guilty and was incarcerated between the Horizon Adult Remand Centre, St. Catherine prison, and Tower Street for the next decade. In 2014, he was diagnosed with Graves' disease, an autoimmune disorder, and his physical health became a subject of concern among observers. "It is my fervent hope that I will not die within the precincts of the prison," he wrote in a 2024 affidavit. "The cell is a literal oven, and each day, I felt like I am being burnt alive."

Kartel's seven children visited him only on prison-sanctioned family days. "I don't want them to think it's a bed of roses," he tells me. "You can come see your dad, and he's dressed up and all. But no, it's still prison. Stay out."

Kartel found ways to stay relevant from the moment he was arrested, dropping new music consistently. As technology evolved, he started to deejay directly into one smartphone, while listening to the riddim on another; a team of sound engineers produced the vocals he'd send them from prison. A lot of what he recorded during this time had a metallic sound because his voice ricocheted off the concrete and steel. "I figured it out that I could use the mattress," he says, describing how he cobbled together a makeshift studio. The best quality mic he had was an iPhone 5S.

FIRST DAY OUT
Kartel left Tower Street Adult Correctional Centre in July 2024 braced by his fiancée.

When the wardens searched his prison cell before dawn looking for contraband, he says, his devices were often confiscated. Until he could get replacements, he passed time by reading Colson Whitehead and Danielle Steel. Kartel tells me he filled 400 songbooks with lyrics. He doesn't refer back to them, though. "Funny enough, since I've come out, I've gone right back to putting the headphones on and saying what comes to mind," he says.

Music wasn't the only thing Kartel was able to work on while he was incarcerated. The manufacturing and branding for Str8 Vybz, his new rum brand, were established while he was in Tower Street. "I'm telling you, the only thing I couldn't do is leave," he says. The rum comes in four varieties. He recommends an overproof blend called Fever. "It's distilled so smooth, it will trick you," he says. "Be careful, otherwise you're going to wake up naked in a hotel with eight drunk hookers."

At the beginning of December, Kartel traveled to Trinidad and Tobago to visit the Angostura distillery, where Str8 Vybz is bottled. He recalls meeting the factory workers: "They took me through the process, how the rum is made, how it's packaged, labeled, and

NATALIE MEADE is a writer and a member of *The New Yorker*'s editorial staff. She writes frequently about Caribbean life, culture, and the environment. This is her first story for *Rolling Stone*.

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distributed." He felt a deep sense of gratitude when he saw the oak barrels. "I met the dude who has been making them for the past 50 years. It meant a lot." He attributes his fortune to a newfound faith: "God is the greatest, bro."

Kartel's mother, Theresa, gave birth to her son Adidja Azim Palmer on Jan. 7, 1976. She and his father, Norris, raised him 15 miles west of Kingston, in Portmore, with his brother and four sisters. His block was called Gaza, named after the Palestinian territory. "This means resistance," he tells me. "Fighting, never giving up."

When Adidja was 11, he realized his knack for poetry. A few years later, in class at Calabar High School, he started to write songs that he'd test out in Portmore's dance halls. He soon fell in with local sound systems Soul Signal and Electric Force, collectives of music selectors and MCs. On the intro to his 2015 album, *Viking,* he recalled the moment he heard Buju Banton for the first time: "Dancehall, that was it. Couldn't get any bigger, couldn't get any better." He took on the stage name Adi Banton in tribute to his idol, and in 1993, he released his first single, "Love Fat Woman." Three years later, he formed a group called Vibes Cartel. When that group disbanded, Adi Banton morphed into Vybz Kartel. He has adopted many monikers over the years: Di Teacha, Worl Boss, the Godfather, the Lyricist.

Bounty Killer, the dancehall superstar, recognized Kartel's talent, and brought him on as his protégé and ghostwriter. In 2004, they released a song together called "In My Eyes." Bounty Killer later recruited a barber and rising deejay named Mavado. All three worked together under Bounty's collective (called Alliance) until Kartel decided to break out on his own. Mavado took the move personally, and the result was a rift that came to be known as the Gully-Gaza war, a beef that was generally fought on the airwaves and in dance halls. Mavado called Kartel out by his government name: "When this squeeze, it leff Adi head at ease/Him flat like banana leaf." Kartel clapped back over the Self Defense riddim: "Barber boy, me a go all out/Shot yuh in front yuh mumma, mek she bawl out."

GOOD TIMES
Kartel performing in New York in 2005, as his career began to take off

Violence surged in Kingston and in Portmore. *The Gleaner,* Jamaica's oldest newspaper, published a scathing editorial in 2009: "Now the followers of the gun hawks themselves — Vybz Kartel (Gaza) and Mavado (Gully) — are shooting, stabbing up and beating one another — not metaphorically or lyrically, but literally, physically, actually," the late journalist Ian Boyne wrote. "Now the fans themselves can't go into certain dance halls and have the pleasure — and the freedom — to hear the two reigning kings of badmanism and gangsterism played without threats to their own personal security."

Jamaica's prime minister at the time, Bruce Golding, called a peace meeting between the two artists. "We're not really enemies," Mavado said while sitting next to Kartel. "It's just about music. We have the fans … and people take it to a different level." Thousands of miles away, in Nairobi, Kartel's music resonated with a group of young men who worshipped him. They formed their own ruthless gang and named it Wadando Gaza. He denounced them in a statement: "Kartel does not support these things."

Vybz Kartel's reach is matched by his productivity: He has released more than a dozen albums and hundreds of singles and mixtapes in the past two decades. His originality and use of metaphor are key to his mass appeal; even his songs about sex involve double entendre. Among his most well-known singles is "Romping Shop," a 2009 duet with Spice. "Deal wid yuh breast like me crushing Irish/Spice, I neva love a pussy like this," Kartel sings. The track prompted the Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica to issue a total prohibition on songs and music videos that endorsed sex.

Kartel took this as a personal attack. He published the text of the so-called dagger-ing ban in his 2012 book, *The Voice of the Jamaican Ghetto,* co-authored with Michael Dawson, a self-proclaimed Garveyite and owner of MECA, a dancehall venue. Kartel criticized the BCJ's efforts to stamp him out: "You banned me the moment I became extremely popular because I am not afraid of speaking the truth about what I see being done to ghetto people," he wrote.

The censure was rooted in the widespread narrative that most music from the dance halls is slackness, a pejorative term for overt sexual content. Even some artists hold this view: Sister Nancy, the original queen of dancehall, tells me that she feels most modern music lacks substance. "I don't see it as music," she says over the phone. "I classify music with good body, good energy, good lyrics. But people do whatever come out them mouth, and most times it's slackness. Nastiness. Profanity. And I don't go for that."

Yet Kartel is adamant that his music contains much more than slackness. "A large amount of my catalog is *also* ghetto commentary," he tells me, citing songs like "Time," "Any Weather," and "Unstoppable."

Carolyn Cooper, a retired literature professor at the University of the West Indies' Mona campus, in Kingston, argues that dancehall's lyrical content should be respected, rather than weaponized. "The censorship is around the sexually explicit lyrics and body language," she says when we speak on a veranda at her home near UWI. "We see the same body language in folk religious rituals such as kumina dances, and the words are symbolic, I feel, of African-derived culture in Jamaica. All of it is tied into the faux respectability of fundamentalist Christianity."

Cooper has invited several dancehall entertainers to speak on campus, creating space for an exchange between her students and their idols. In 2011, she asked Kartel to deliver a lecture. Five thousand people showed up, she says. "I wrote the speech, did the PowerPoint, everything. That's my job," he tells me.

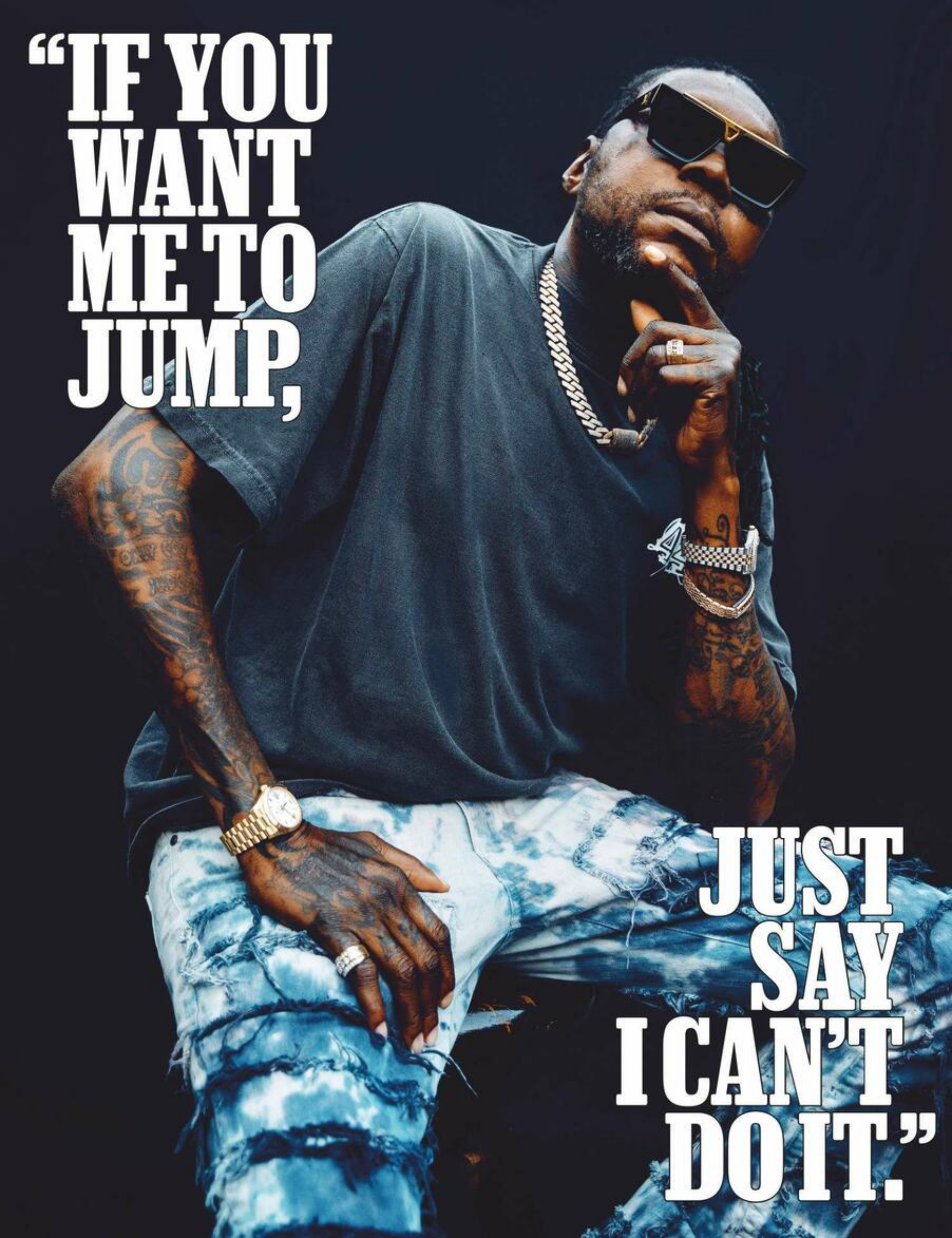
Months after that campus appearance, Kartel started to film a reality-dating show called *Teacha's Pet*. During production, in September 2011, authorities found a small amount of herb in his hotel room, and he was arrested. Soon after, he faced more serious charges, as authorities accused him of being involved in the killing of Barrington "Bossie" Burton, a 27-year-old businessman and, separately, of murdering Clive "Lizard" Williams. (Kartel was acquitted of Burton's murder in 2013.)

In the summer of 2011, according to court documents, Kartel loaned two guns to Williams, giving him a deadline to return them. Kartel later summoned Williams to a meeting at his home, where he, Shawn Campbell, Kahira Jones, and Andre St John were waiting. When Williams arrived empty-handed, prosecutors alleged, he was beaten to death. His body was never found. Kartel, Campbell, Jones, and St John were all charged with murder, and they pleaded not guilty, sparking one of the most complicated trials in Jamaica's history.

The prosecution's case relied on evidence lifted from copied SIM-card data. "If dem want dem friends fi live, dem better get my shoes," Kartel is heard saying on audio messages. "Shoes" was interpreted as code for his two missing weapons. Investigators found texts on a phone that they felt amounted to a confession. "Wi chop up di bwoy Lizard fine, fine and dash him weh," a message from Kartel said. The defense attorneys claimed that the duplicate data files had been tampered with and breached local privacy laws.

Issues with the case snowballed at the beginning of 2014. One of the 12 jurors learned that her son was incarcerated at the same prison as the defendants. She feared that he might be unsafe, and the judge dismissed her. The trial was winding down when another juror was accused of bribing the others. The prosecution argued that "one bad juror" should not upset the entire trial. On March 13, the jury convicted Kartel and his three co-defendants with a verdict of 10 to one. Weeks later, all four were sentenced to life in prison.

Kartel appealed the decision within a month of the sentencing, yet the hearings didn't begin until 2018. By that time, he had been incarcerated for seven Continued on 129


"IF YOU WANT ME TO JUMP,
JUST SAY I CAN'T DO IT."

When Nicole DuFresne was killed on the streets of New York, the aftermath was a tabloid circus. Twenty years later, I went looking for the woman I'd lost

By MARY JANE GIBSON

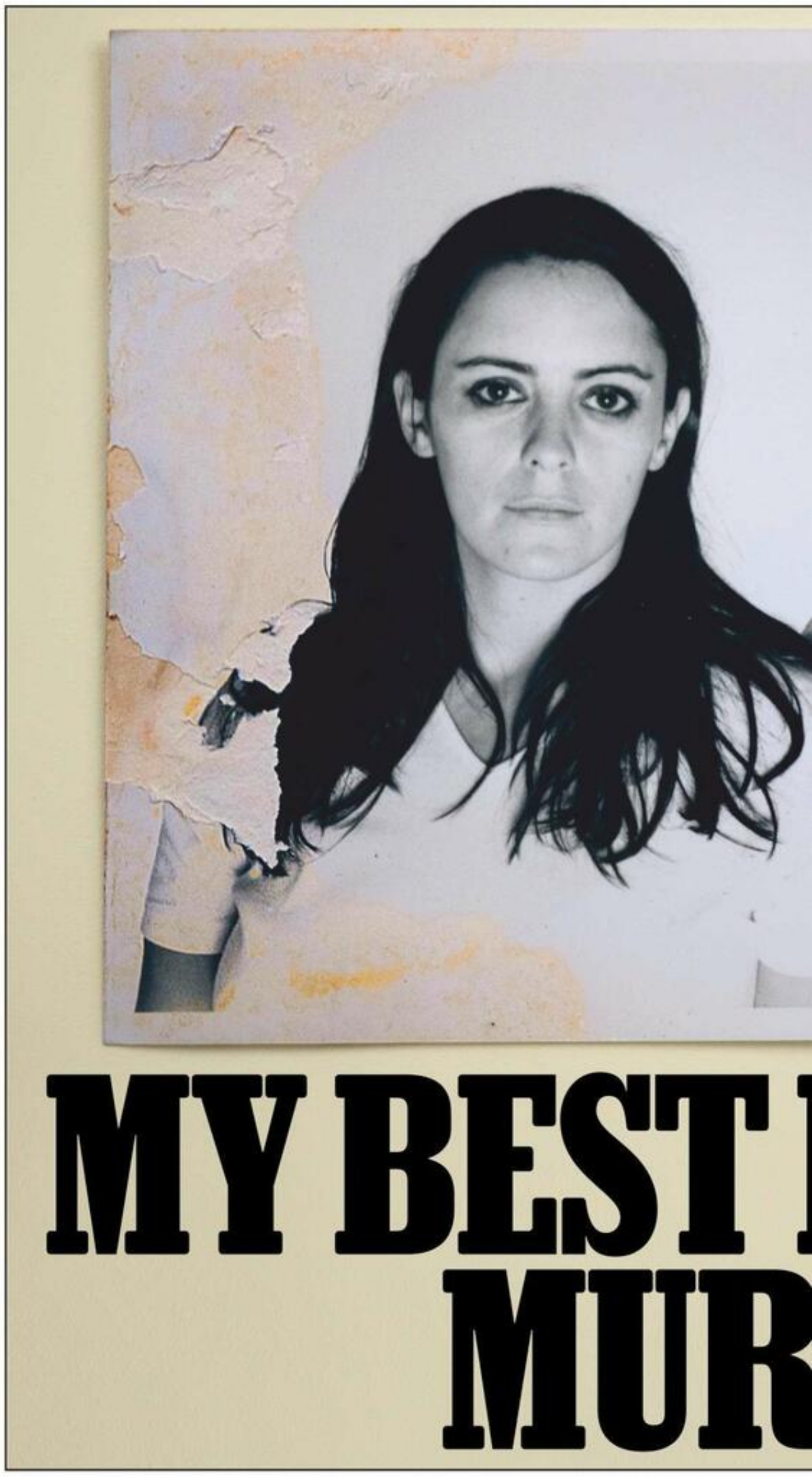
I've been dreaming about the Badlands again. It's a scorching July day in 2002, and Nicole and I are hauling ass in my VW Beetle across South Dakota. I'm driving; she's riding shotgun, eating a Slim Jim. We're blasting *The Eminem Show* with the windows down, our hair whipping in the hot desert air, when Nicole sees a sign and tells me we need to pull over.

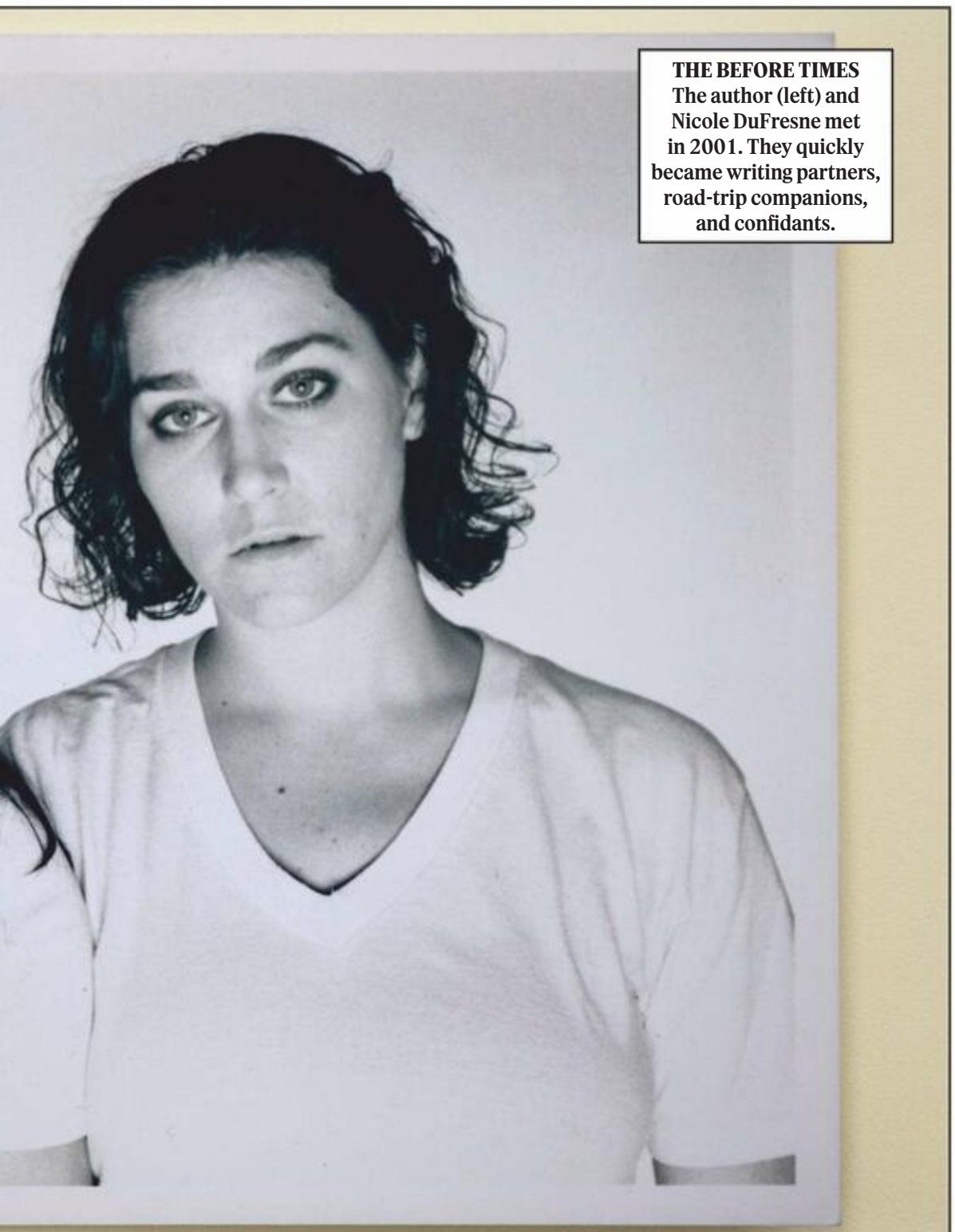
We've hiked a mile or so into the moonscape of the park when we come across a pink boulder with a deep split down its center, like a giant earth vulva. Nicole grins at me, strips off her clothes, and springs onto the rock. "Take a picture," she says, arching her nakedness into a bridge over the dark cleft. I snap a photo. She shakes her curls at me upside-down and says, "Now you." I get undressed, climb up, and thrust my hips to the sky. She takes my picture. We're getting dressed when a couple of hikers come around the bend, and we cackle all the way back to the car.

In the summer of 2024, I began retracing our journey on a cross-country road trip, visiting people who could help me put the pieces together, trying to remember who Nicole was before everything went wrong, since a chance encounter with seven kids blew our lives apart, with a bullet ending one life and shattering countless others. Murder doesn't only happen to the person who dies.

It's been two decades since the media took an incredulous phrase that fell out of Nicole's mouth — "What are you going to do, shoot us?" — and blamed her for her own death while capitalizing on it: *The Village Voice* called it "A Murder Made for the Front Page." The *New York Post* covered the killer's trial gavel to gavel, while glossy magazines wrote about how not to let this happen to you.

Things have been fucked up ever since the night when I sat in a Manhattan police station trying to comprehend that Nicole was dead, and I was not. But after 20 years, I felt like I could finally revisit her story. With a therapist guiding me, I went back to the night Nicole died over and over until something shifted. It





THE BEFORE TIMES The author (left) and Nicole DuFresne met in 2001. They quickly became writing partners, road-trip companions, and confidants.

FRIEND'S RDER

was like a foreign object had been extracted from a wound. It still exists, but it's outside me, and I can examine it without pain. Now, I want to know how the others who loved her have coped with losing her. That's what I'm on this trip to find out.

'She Always Felt Like a Little Bit of an Outsider'

Nicole DuFresne was born on Jan. 5, 1977, in Wayzata, Minnesota, a wealthy suburb west of Minneapolis. Her father, Tom, was a forceful, charismatic man who worked as a commercial real-estate developer. Her mother, Linda, a knockout with turquoise eyes, was a gentle, creative woman. Nicole and her younger brother, Zach, both inherited their mother's looks, but Nicole took after her father when it came to temperament; she was a passionate, moody kid who would dominate on the soccer pitch and then write poetry in her bedroom. "I think she always felt like a little bit of an outsider, even in our family," Zach DuFresne tells me when I visit him at his quiet suburban home in Colorado, "but she was totally unafraid to be herself."

Tom DuFresne wanted his kids to have the best of everything, but from a young age, Nicole bucked his attempts to insulate her with money. She hated the preppy private school her parents sent her to, and insisted on attending public school for junior high before transferring to an arts high school. When she moved to Boston to study theater at Emerson College, her father rented her a brownstone apartment in a tony neighborhood, but Nicole chafed at feeling like a rich kid. She started to work odd jobs that didn't conflict with her schooling.

In her junior year of college, Nicole was raped in the parking lot of a bar. When she told her parents about the assault, they begged her to come home, but she refused; she'd been cast in a show that she didn't want to drop out of. She received counseling and later used the traumatic experience as inspiration for a two-woman play, *Matter.*

I have a copy of the play with me on my cross-country travels. I keep returning to one line that articulates a familiar feeling: "In my dreams someone is waiting to eat me."

Nicole and I met in Seattle at Theater Schmeater in August 2001, on the first day of rehearsal for *Our Country's Good,* a play set in a penal colony in 1780s Australia. The director wanted everyone to be as disgusting as possible: lice, syphilis, scabies, goiters, rotten teeth. Nicole was good at getting ugly; her performance was frightening, "almost unbearably tragic," one reviewer wrote. I played a convict named Shitty Meg and pushed the gross-out factor as far as I could. We bonded over the freedom we found in being filthy; our playacting felt like an antidote to what the world expected of us.

She loved that I'd worked on an Alaskan salmon boat. I was mesmerized by her witchy hippie energy, lean kinetic body, and throaty

laugh. After the show closed, she asked me if I would create a show with her. We wrote a two-hander inspired by a book about CIA brainwashing experiments and hit the fringe-festival circuit in the summer of 2002.

Burning Cage was an intense play. A reviewer at Minneapolis Fringe called us "feminists with an axe to grind." We scrawled "Come see the axe-grinding feminists!" in chalk outside of every venue after that. We did better at other festivals — one critic said our show was "precisely the kind of art and passion that fringe theatre should be about." Another called us "balls-out brave."

By the time we won Artistic Pick at the Seattle Fringe that fall, we'd been on the road together for most of the summer, and we weren't sick of each other, which felt monumental to me. I'd always been reserved in my friendships, but Nicole refused to allow it. She told me I needed to trust her; I told her I had a weird feeling that things with us wouldn't last. "It's going to last," she said. I chalked up my anxiety to existential dread, and we started to plan our next collaboration.

A couple of months later, Nicole and her fiancé, Jeffrey Sparks, were moving to New York, and she stopped by my place with a farewell gift — a little glass vase holding a paper scroll. She said it was a message for whenever I couldn't reach her and needed to hear from her. I promised her I'd be right behind her; we had things to do.

Nicole was thrilled by the energy of New York. She started developing a pilot with Jeffrey to pitch to the Food Channel (*Nikki's New York*), and launched herself into the downtown theater scene, painting sets at LAByrinth Theater Company while concentrating on her own undertakings with a group she'd co-founded with Emerson classmates. She worked at a nonprofit serving seniors on the Upper West Side to pay the bills. "I feel that I can be my absolute self [in New York] since there are so many different souls here," she wrote in her journal. "They all work like a puzzle. I suppose there are many hardships I will have here, but I am excited for all the gold I could find."

A year later, I made the trek from Seattle with my boyfriend, Scott Nath. We moved into a fifth-floor walk-up at the foot of the Williamsburg Bridge, and I loved the aching feeling of climbing into the sky. We survived off cheap burgers and egg sandwiches from Mom's Diner, and $2 PBRs from Welcome to the Johnsons; we'd peer into the window of wd~50, the city's hottest new molecular gastronomy dining establishment, knowing we couldn't afford to even walk inside. The grime was exhilarating, and the glamorous boutiques opening between old-world vestiges — hat stores, bridal shops — gave the neighborhood a sense of urgency. We'd wander home at sunrise past commuters making their way to the train as we crawled into bed.

Nicole and Jeffrey had us over for a welcome dinner, and she gave us a bag of weed mixed with lavender. "You'll need it," she said with a laugh. She told me I should get new headshots; she'd just had hers done, and was insistent that we both had to step up our game. The following months were a glorious whirlwind of auditioning, acting, and writing. Nicole was producing new work with her theater company; I was making a living as an actor. We met up to write whenever we could, ginning each other up as we brainstormed ideas and to-do lists. We laughed so much: I can still hear her bellowing "I have to pee like a *horse*!" as she charged into Cafe Mogador after being stuck on the L train for an hour.

BRIGHT FUTURE
DuFresne moved from Seattle to New York in 2002 to be part of the downtown theater scene. "I feel that I can be my absolute self there," she wrote at the time.

BY THE TIME WE RANG IN 2005 TOGETHER AT A WAREHOUSE PARTY, I FELT LIKE WE COULD TAKE OVER THE WORLD.

Reading through our notebooks, I'm struck by how relentlessly confident we were in ourselves, and each other. By the time we rang in 2005 at a warehouse party in a dilapidated former church — the kind of sweaty all-night revelry I'd always dreamed of going to — I felt like we could take over the world.

'They Were So Happy, It Made Me Angrier'

Rudy Fleming was born on June 23, 1985. His family lived in the West New Brighton housing projects in a bleak part of Staten Island where more than 15 percent of the population lived below the poverty line. Violence was a

grim reality in the Fleming household; his father was shot and killed when he was a child; an older brother was given a five-year sentence for assault; another was sentenced to eight years in prison for beating a man with a baseball bat; and a third was shot and killed with his own gun during a botched robbery.

Fleming struggled with anxiety and depression from a young age, according to court documents; he was diagnosed with a learning disability at the age of eight and enrolled in an individualized program by the Department of Education, but there's nothing on the record to indicate that he received any psychiatric help. In 2001, when he was 16, Fleming pulled a gun on truancy officers who picked him up for loitering. According to the police report, which designated him an emotionally disturbed person, he told arresting officers, "You should have shot me. I want you to kill me. I want to die." He received a three-year prison sentence on a weapons charge and was sent to an upstate correctional facility more than 200 miles away.

At an April 2004 parole hearing, he said prison had taught him to learn from his mistakes. That June, three days before his 19th birthday, Fleming was released on parole.

In January 2005, Fleming moved into the apartment of his godfather, Servino Simmon, in the Baruch Houses on the Lower East Side, a sea of tan high-rises overlooking some of the most expensive real estate in the country. Fleming had grown up close with Simmon's kids — Servisio, who was 21 years old, and Servano, who was 17 — and they were living there, too. Fleming's 18-year-old girlfriend, Ashley Evans, a well-liked high school cheerleader, also moved into the apartment.

On the night of Jan. 26, 2005, Fleming, Evans, Servisio, and Servano, along with their 18-year-old cousin David Simmon, David's friend Kayshawn Boyd, 15, and Boyd's 14-year-old girlfriend, Tatianna McDonald, were hanging out at the apartment, smoking weed, drinking, and playing with Fleming's gun, which had been stolen from its legal owner in South Carolina in 2002. It's unclear who Fleming got it from or how long he'd had it, but he liked showing off the heavy silver six-shot .357 Magnum revolver, spinning the chamber, loading and unloading it. Servano thought the gun was cool, too; at one point, he and his brother played a mock round of Russian roulette without pulling the trigger.

That same night, Nicole was working her first bartending shift at Rockwood Music Hall, a new venue on the Lower East Side. Scott and I met up with Jeffrey at the bar to celebrate her new gig; Nicole served us a couple of rounds, and when she finished her shift, the four of us went to a raucous hipster joint called Max Fish, where we ordered rum and cokes and played pinball.

After a few hours at the apartment, Fleming and his friends were bored, so they went out to "start trouble," McDonald later said. They were walking toward the Delancey-Essex subway station when they passed 22-year-old security guard Adam Chavez coming home from work. Chavez was wearing a white leather jacket that caught Fleming's eye. He chased after Chavez with David Simmon and Boyd, who punched him and demanded he give up the jacket, but after Fleming whacked him twice with his gun, Chavez managed to pull away and run into the street in front of a passing taxi. He called 911, but by the time cops showed up, the friends were on a train to Brooklyn. Chavez declined to file a police report and headed home.

The friends took the J train through the rooftops of Brooklyn and got off at Broadway Junction, deep in the borough. They hung out on the subway platform, where the boys tried to goad Evans and McDonald into fighting a couple of other girls waiting for the train. When they refused, the guys made fun of them for chickening out, so when they caught a train back to Manhattan, the girls said they would fight anyone they pointed out. They got off back at the Delancey-Essex stop around 3 a.m. A surveillance camera outside Schiller's Liquor Bar captured the group walking east on Rivington toward Clinton.

We had left Max Fish a few minutes earlier. We were buzzed, goofing around, pushing one another into snowbanks — oblivious gentrifiers on the home turf of seven friends out looking for a fight. When Evans heard us laughing as we crossed onto Clinton Street, her resentment flamed. "They were extremely happy, so that made me even angrier," she later told the police. Pissed off, she pointed us out to Fleming as the ones they should fight. Then everything happened fast.

LOCKED UP
Rudy Fleming was convicted of Nicole's murder. He is serving a life sentence.

I remember being stopped. Shoved against a wall with a gun. My purse is yanked away. A loud bang. Scott running, screaming, "Murderer! Murderer!" Nicole on her back in the street. My bare knees on cold grit as I kneel next to her. She's looking up at Jeffrey as he leans over her, telling her to stay with him. The headlights of cars coming toward us off the Williamsburg Bridge. Then I'm in the back of a cop car, looking at Scott's crumpled face in alternating red and blue light.

According to witnesses who later testified in court, Fleming stepped in front of us, pulled out his gun, and told us to give him our money. Scott said we didn't have any because we'd spent it all at the bar. When Jeffrey tried to push past him, Fleming smashed him in the face with the gun, opening up a gash over his eye. Then, as Nicole went to check on Jeffrey, Fleming slammed me against a security gate with the gun. He yanked my bag away and threw it to Evans and McDonald as Nicole approached him and pushed him, saying, "You got what you wanted." Then, according to testimony from McDonald and Servano Simmon, she asked him, "What are you going to do, shoot us?" Fleming lifted the gun, pointed it at her chest, and fired. Nicole stumbled and fell into the street as they ran. The bullet had pierced her heart.

Cops took us to the 7th Precinct station, where Scott and I waited in an interview room under buzzing fluorescents for what felt like hours until Jeffrey came back from the hospital and told us Nicole was dead. He went into another room to call her father. I remember hearing him howling.

When we left the station on the morning of Jan. 27, I couldn't believe the sun was shining; it was like the world had changed shape, and no one had noticed. Scott and I went home, pulled the blinds, and lay beside each other in the darkness, not talking. At some point, I remembered her message in a bottle. I got it down from my bookshelf and unfurled the scroll. It said:

Believe in yourself like I believe in you.
Sending you lots of groovey love vibes.
Have faith.
Listen to yourself.
With love,
xo Nicole

'Becoming One of New York's Super-Victims'

"She died in my arms." That was Jeffrey's heartbreaking statement to a reporter who tracked him down after a police bulletin about the shooting went out that day. The story electrified the media; the *New York Post* ran a cover story with Nicole's headshot under the headline "Beauty Slain." A photo of Jeffrey, bloody from being pistol-whipped, accompanied the accounts of her murder.

Reporters were waiting at LaGuardia Airport for Tom and Linda DuFresne when they flew in from Minnesota to identify their daughter's body; members of the media camped out on our doorstep to snag a photo of Scott and me looking pale and shell-shocked. It was surreal to read tabloid accounts that the gun had been aimed at me too, that Scott thought he had heard it go off. My reality was fracturing.

Before internet ubiquity as we know it existed, the story of her death went viral; Nicole's face was on newsstands across the country, and every major media outlet showed up at her memorial. *The Village Voice* noted that "DuFresne is on her way to becoming one of New York's super-victims."

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PREVIOUS SPREAD: MAGGIE SOLADAY. OPPOSITE PAGE: JULIA NEWMAN. THIS PAGE: © BRYAN SMITH/ZUMA PRESS

Surveillance videos and tips led to the seven friends being apprehended within days. The tabloids made hay in the wake of their arrests, branding them "thugs" and "fiends." The report that our laughter had angered them was shocking; "Nicole Died for Smiling — 'Slay' Creeps Picked on Happy Victim," one article blared. A photo of Fleming sobbing in the back of a police car after his arrest ran under the headline "He Cries for Himself."

I hadn't heard Nicole say anything to Fleming, but police told reporters that bystanders had heard her say something to the effect of "What are you going to do, shoot us next?" When Evans was arrested, she said Nicole had been the aggressor, claiming that Fleming shot her only because he'd slipped after she pushed him. Evans was accused of taking the murder weapon back to the Simmon apartment, where police had found it hidden under a bed.

After Evans' allegation was reported, the media narrative shifted — now Nicole's death was her fault because she'd "dared" Fleming. Safety advocates said that Nicole's "defiant" stand had prompted Fleming to shoot her, and the National Crime Prevention Council circulated a memo on how to survive a mugging, advising potential victims to "stay cool and comply with robbers."

The Stranger, a Seattle alt-weekly, ran an anonymous letter addressing Nicole that read, in part, "It seems you misplayed your role as mugging victim. This was not street theater you were involved in. It was real-life drama, which you helped turn into a tragedy.... Your last words suggest you did not understand the material. I'm sad that you will not get another audition."

Cosmopolitan published a feature titled "How Not to Let Your Fearlessness Go Too Far" with tips on what not to do when held at gunpoint, next to a list of mistakes that Nicole had supposedly made.

Richard Price wrote an acclaimed novel, *Lush Life,* in which he echoed her purported last words; after a long night of drinking, a would-be writer is gunned down when he makes the dumb decision to tell a mugger "Not tonight, my man." An episode of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* ripped the story from the headlines. In that version, it was the friends who'd set her up.

Even after all of these years, the story has stuck. I'm listening to one of my favorite podcasts on my road trip when they bring up Nicole's murder. "She got in their faces," one of the co-hosts says. "Like, just give them your purse ... don't start an altercation." Tears fill my eyes; I have to pull over. Nicole was fiercely protective; she was upset; her death wasn't her fault. Fleming was an angry kid with a gun that he wanted to use. Maybe Nicole would be alive if our laughter hadn't filled Evans with rage, if Fleming had gotten the help he needed at school, if the gun had gone off when he pushed me instead. Her murder was a senseless act of violence. Speculating about a different outcome only intensified the pain.

'A Young Person Who Cannot Come to Grips'

Fleming did not respond to multiple attempts to contact him for this article; neither did any of the other six friends, who would now all be in their thirties or early forties. I want to ask them how their lives have been since the night our paths crossed; what details have stayed with them; how their age and maturity have shaped the way they think about the events of that night. But the only update I get is from Detective George Taylor, the lead investigator on the case, who tells me that he saw Servano Simmon a few years later; the only one not charged, he'd straightened his life out and was attending college.

Fleming was charged with first-degree murder. He'd exhibited bizarre behavior when he was arrested, mumbling, stuffing paper towels in his mouth, and going limp in the interview room. He was admitted to Bellevue Hospital and held under observation for several months. In a pretrial hearing, Fleming's attorney, Anthony Ricco, told the judge that Fleming was mentally incompetent; evidently, he was hearing voices telling him not to eat and hallucinating a giant marshmallow man. However, a court-appointed psychologist and psychiatrist testified that Fleming had gained eight pounds while under observation and that his symptoms only appeared when he knew he was being watched. Although Fleming had "fewer resources than most individuals" to cope with the stress he was under, including a lack of family support, they believed he was feigning his symptoms. He was found competent to stand trial.

SENSELESS VIOLENCE
The narrative in the press was initially sympathetic to Nicole, but that soon shifted.

Fleming never appeared in the courtroom at his trial; he was removed before jury selection after an outburst that required several officers to restrain him. Assistant District Attorney Robert Hettleman called it a "well-timed action" for someone trying to avoid trial, and the judge agreed, ordering a CCTV video feed to be set up so Fleming could watch the proceedings from his holding cell.

POLICE TOLD REPORTERS THAT BYSTANDERS HAD HEARD NICOLE SAY, "WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO, SHOOT US NEXT?"

McDonald testified that Nicole's shooting was intentional: It had nothing to do with Fleming being pushed, she said. Scott and Servano Simmon also testified that Fleming had shot Nicole from an arm's length away. Jeffrey testified that, although the shock of being pistol-whipped had dazed him, his memory of holding Nicole as she lay dying in the street was crystal clear. When I was called to the stand, I could only share my scattershot version of the encounter. It didn't matter; witnesses confirmed that Nicole had been executed at point-blank range.

On Oct. 12, 2006, the jury found Fleming guilty on nine counts, including first-degree murder, robbery, and criminal possession of a weapon. No family or friends had ever come to support him. At his sentencing, his attorney asked the court for mercy. "People rehabilitate themselves, and that's my hope for Rudy Fleming, who's in the back, cowering in his cell," Ricco said. "He's a young person who cannot come to grips." The judge deemed Fleming a "cold-blooded, thoroughly amoral killer" and gave him life without parole. The *Post* got in one last dig when Jeffrey told a reporter outside the court that he was relieved Fleming hadn't received the death penalty. The headline read "Fiancé's Pity Is Misplaced for This Vermin."

Evans and four of the others took plea deals. Servisio Simmon received a sentence of 10 years for first-degree robbery; David Simmon was sentenced to six years for first-degree attempted robbery; Boyd was referred to family court; McDonald was adjudicated a youthful offender and received a sentence of one to three years for first-degree robbery. At her sentencing, when Evans entered a guilty plea to first-degree robbery, she apologized to the DuFresne family. "If I could take it all back, I most sincerely would," she said. Linda DuFresne replied, "Ours is a sentence of life without Nicole." Evans got six years. Fleming appealed his sentence in 2010. It was denied.

'Nothing More Precious Than Time'

I went back to my restaurant job a couple of weeks after the murder. A co-worker asked me what Nicole had said to make the kid shoot her. There was a faraway ringing in my ears as someone else said, "Leave her alone, man." I was refilling the owner's coffee when he grasped my wrist and said quietly, "Survi-

"A PRESSURE COOKER OF RAGE"
Nicole's fiancé, Jeffrey, saw his grief turn to anger after her death. Now, he aspires to be a good father in her honor. "I liked her vision of me," he says.

vor guilt is a real thing." I knew that his parents were Holocaust survivors, so I nodded at him mutely and went to the bathroom to scream into my latte-stained apron. A few weeks later, I terrorized an elderly Weight Watchers leader after our weekly meeting by telling her what had happened and that I wasn't OK. She patted my hand and told me I shouldn't come back until I felt better.

When I went to collect my wallet from One Police Plaza, they handed it to me in a plastic bag labeled "Homicide Evidence." A letter arrived from the New York State Office of Victim Services offering me funds for therapy. I thought it was pretty funny that I was a state-sanctioned victim. Nothing felt real. I couldn't sleep. I started drinking to anesthetize myself, making it most of the way through two bottles of wine before stumbling into bed around dawn. When I did sleep, I had nightmares. My relationship with Scott started to suffer. But I kept telling myself I was OK; I wasn't the one who died.

For years, I tried to articulate how I felt, but I couldn't find the words. At one point, I took a solo-performance class, thinking I'd write a one-woman show about — murder? Gun violence? Grief? I can't remember, but the teacher told me I wasn't ready to address my experience. At the time, I was furious, but years later, I'm thankful for her candor. She was right; I needed time.

My first stop on the road trip is in Denver, where I spend a sunny afternoon with Zach, his wife, and their two kids at a neighborhood swimming pool. As we listen to the splashing of happy children, Zach and I reminisce about the Thanksgiving dinner we had with Nicole in 2004, when the siblings walked home across the snowy Williamsburg Bridge after dinner at our place. They stopped to call Linda and sing "New York, New York" to her from the middle of the East River. It was the last weekend he had with his sister.

After the trial and sentencings, a noose of grief tightened around the DuFresne family. Although Linda continued to set a place for her daughter at the table at holiday gatherings, Zach says that no one spoke her name: "My mom never recovered, and part of my dad died when Nicole died." Tom has been in a care facility since suffering a debilitating stroke several years ago; Linda has Alzheimer's-related dementia, and lives in a nursing home not far from Zach.

Linda meets me in the lobby when I pull up for our visit. She's frail, wearing a back brace, and her face is stamped with pain, but her eyes are bright. We go to a restaurant, where we order wine and sit on the breezy patio. She asks me what I'm working on. I take a deep breath, and tell her I'm writing about Nicole. "She'd be happy that you are," Linda says. Then she puts a hand on my arm and asks me to tell her about the night her daughter died. I tell her what I remember, and we hold hands in silence for a long time.

Later, over dinner, Zach tells me that substance abuse dominated his life for years after Nicole was killed. One night, when he was drinking with friends, one of them said something about her that set him off; Zach got into his car in a rage and drove into the side of a mountain near Aspen. "I was fucking annihilated," he says. "I should have died." He credits his marriage and fatherhood with averting him from his path of self-destruction. Now, his family celebrates his sister's birthday every January. "We bake a cake and tell stories about Nicole," he says. "I'm trying to give my children some sense of their auntie."

Next, I visit Jeffrey in his Midwest home. Over coffee in his backyard, he tells me about proposing to Nicole. They were on a road trip to Joshua Tree. "I had this overwhelming feeling that I wanted to spend the rest of my life listening to her," he recalls. "She was sitting next to the fire. I got down on my knee, and she starts throwing all these 'What ifs?' at me, like, 'What if I get a terrible disease and lose my hair?'" His answers came easily. "There wasn't anything I felt we couldn't handle." She said she would marry him on one condition: that they move to New York.

After she was killed, Jeffrey's grief coalesced into anger under relentless scrutiny from the media: "I was a pressure cooker of rage, trying to keep the lid on." He went to the Middle East to work on a documentary about war widows, where he was held at gunpoint more than once. Danger felt comforting to him; at one point, he was riding in a car that narrowly missed hitting an oncoming truck. "I remember this distinct feeling of water washing over me," Jeffrey recalls. "Like, 'Here it comes.' And I felt myself smiling." Now, he aspires to be a good father to his 13-year-old son in Nicole's memory. "I channel my love into being the person that she envisioned me to be," he says. "I liked her vision of me."

A few weeks later, I meet Scott for dinner in Brooklyn; it's the first time we've seen each other in years. We stayed together until 2013, and had plenty of good times, but we had stared at each other through hell and couldn't make it work for the long haul. We order pizza and cocktails, even though Scott doesn't drink much anymore. He tells me that he didn't feel the need to self-destruct like the rest of us because his testimony helped secure Fleming's conviction — and because he entered therapy right away. "I remember trying to see if that sadness was still there," he says, "and I was like, 'I don't need to dig in. It doesn't help me move forward.'" Nonetheless, Nicole's murder changed his trajectory; he gave up on his dream of being an actor, and took a corporate job. Since the night Nicole died, he often thinks about how limited his time is. "There's nothing more precious than that."

I can see how my PTSD has played out through guilt, dissociation, and self-annihilation, but I didn't have clarity until recently. After Scott and I split up, I moved on to bad relationships with men who gave me the affection I felt I deserved, which was none. For years, happiness felt like a harbinger of bad things to come; feeling anxious and miserable was familiar. But when my last relationship flamed out, a friend recommended a form of trauma therapy called eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, or EMDR. After several sessions, I felt I could finally write about Nicole, as I've wanted to do for so long.

It feels good to revisit our work, to read her journals, and to drive for days, thinking about my gorgeous, funny, wild friend without feeling suffocated. Instead of dwelling on how she died, I'm remembering how brightly she lived. I can see Nicole standing in the doorway of my apartment on the night she came to pick me up for a Halloween party wearing a slinky champagne-colored dress, smoky glitter outlining her blue eyes under a cascade of curls. I asked her what her costume was. She winked at me, and said, "I'm a dream."

OPPOSITE PAGE: "NEW YORK POST." THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF JEFFREY SPARKS

Reviews

★★★★★ CLASSIC ★★★★ EXCELLENT ★★★ GOOD ★★ FAIR ★ POOR

Givēon's Next-Gen Old-School R&B Heartbreak

Turn the lights down low: This classic crooner offers a stunning depiction of love at the boiling point. By Mankaprr Conteh

With his oaky baritone, Givēon often sounds like he teleported to us from the 1970s. In the rapid-fire internet age, his love songs — frequently lost-love songs — are unhurried. At his best, he's like a barrel-aged cognac — warm, earthy, and mature. Still, when he rose to prominence at around the age of 25 about five years ago, in a landscape where more modern, edgy alternative R&B dominated, he allowed his steady, soulful production to ride on top of subtle rap drums; across his debut EP, *Take Time,* and album, *Give or Take,* he even dipped into cloudy MC cadences, too.

Now, on his sophomore LP, and well established as a singular voice, there's nothing "alternative" about his musical approach. *Beloved* is almost barren of the hip-hop flourishes that peppered his earlier work, and instead leans all the way into the orchestral R&B of another time, lush with searing strings and the crash of real hi-hats. Rich and authentic, *Beloved* feels indebted to Al Green, Philly soul, the Jackson 5, and Blaxploitation soundtracks.

Demonstrating the most robust control of his instrument yet, Givēon offers a stunning, panoramic view of romantic relationships in their toughest places. He's always been a real yearner, taking cues from the "Black women heartbreak music" he's said he was raised on by his mother — singers like Anita Baker and Mary J. Blige.

True to form, much of Beloved lives at the end of the road romantically, where songs like "Twenties," "Mud," and "Strangers" ache with defeat. "Yes, I'm taking this hard," he proclaims in a pained, zigzag riff on "Strangers," after learning his ex is finally seeing someone else. By "Numb," he's unable to feel at all. When he admits, "I've been here before," over angelic background coos, it's a cunning recognition that a heartbroken Givēon is one his listeners are all too familiar with, though this version is the most visceral yet.

And though in these gut-wrenching moments, Givēon is the victim — even telling an old flame who has tried to play that same role, "You run my name through the mud/Wipe that dirt off your shoes.... You be lying to yourself so much it sounds true" — he complicates his reliability as a narrator, too, adding more nuance to his romantic persona.

On tracks like "Diamonds for Your Pain (Interlude)" and "Keeper," he's slyly working his way out of the doghouse, telling a girl on the former, "Prettier than I remember/Haven't seen you since December/You know I come around every summertime, swimming in your teardrops." (There's sharp imagery like this all over the album, building on the cinematic soundscapes acclaimed producers like Jeff Gitty and Jahaan Sweet have created with Givēon.) And though the groovy "Avalanche" is only sung from a place of promise and not repair, a naivete that could also prove unproductive peeks through. "Intuition says we're way too young to start a family/But I've been thinking about forever, my dear," he beams, delusionally.

Beloved especially shines when it embraces how complicated heartache can be, like the songs where Givēon or the object of his affection linger in limbo. On "Backup Plan," he watches anxiously as his lover quietly contemplates leaving him; on "Bleeding," he's a suitor tiptoeing around the shards of a woman's broken heart,

★★★★

GIVĒON
Beloved
EPIC

knowing she's still fixated on her ex. He's more hopeful on "I Can Tell," where he's proudly making his case as a better man than the one he's trying to get some young woman to leave behind.

Fittingly, the album ends with Givēon as part of a couple who seem committed to surmounting conflict together, a buoyant reminder that, even in his world, not all snags precipitate a breakup. "I'll even let you run me down to the ground/Watching you while you run your mouth/I stick around," he sings brightly. "I love you 'cause you love me/Through the good, bad, and ugly."

BENSON BOONE CAN'T LAND THE BACKFLIP

★★

BENSON BOONE
American Heart
WARNER

BENSON BOONE HAS been unavoidable for well over a year now: His 2024 single "Beautiful Things" quickly became a monster success, first on TikTok and later everywhere else, debuting on *Billboard*'s Hot 100 the month after it was released and peaking at Number Two. And if it isn't the music you've heard, you've surely seen this man do flips on every stage he's been on, from Coachella to the Eras Tour to the Grammys. His sophomore album, *American Heart,* comes just 14 months after his debut album, *Fireworks & Rollerblades,* a capitalization off the sudden superstardom that has made him both a radio staple and porn-stached sex symbol.

Despite the Freddie Mercury-referencing deep-V jumpsuits he's wearing these days, his latest deflates under the weight of all its glam-pop and Seventies and Eighties pastiche. At times swaggerless and too pristine in his attempts to corner the market of retro-pop stardom, Boone loses the youthful edge of his debut and the rawness that made his biggest hit soar so high. On *American Heart,* songs like "Man in Me" and "Mystical Magical" are the worst offenders of his →

Illustration by AKIKO STEHRENBERGER

CRITICS WEIGH IN
WHAT IS THE BEST SONG OF THE SUMMER ... EVER?

"PURPLE RAIN," PRINCE
Arguably the greatest rock ballad ever, Prince's masterpiece is like a sudden, powerful, drenching storm that saves you from the grimy, relentless heat of the day. LISA TOZZI

"THE GREAT ESCAPE," BOYS LIKE GIRLS
When this pop-punk epic came out in 2006, I was too young to have the summer it romanticized — full of small-town debauchery and fearlessness. Now that I'm older and freer, this is the song I put on to appreciate it. MANKAPRR CONTEH

"SUMMER GIRLS," LFO
The pop explosion of 1999 peaked with the most awesomely ridiculous boy-band hit ever, with shout-outs to the New Kids on the Block, Kevin Bacon, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Billy Shakespeare. ROB SHEFFIELD

"GOT TO GIVE IT UP," MARVIN GAYE
Gaye's disco moment is the quintessential summer sound, and not just because it features sound bites from a party and a shout-out to *Soul Train* host Don Cornelius. ANGIE MARTOCCIO

← retromania, the latter too cloying and unconvincing in its whimsy. At least the ELO-referencing "Mr Electric Blue" is saved by an earnest tribute to his father and his own ambitions. "Momma Song" is just as endearing, offering more insight into a young pop star's personality and sense of identity. Even though Boone plays it too safe here, there are moments when his star power makes it clear there's potential; lead single "Sorry I'm Here for Someone Else" is a sharp stadium-pop moment that could take over as "Beautiful Things" begins to die down.

Same goes for the title track, a warm reflection on a teenage car accident where his references (touches of Bruce Springsteen and Bob Seger, but bathed in synths) are most convincing. There's still a long way to go before the most authentic form of Boone emerges, but there's no denying there's a spark of charm that reels you in, whether or not you're sick of his throaty screams and backflips. **BRITTANY SPANOS**

KESHA ROARS BACK WITH A GREAT BIG MESS

★★★★

KESHA
(Period.)
KESHA

IT'S EASY TO root for Kesha, which makes listening to (*Period.*) — her first album as an independent artist, hence its July 4 release date — such a blast. Bookended by pensive moments, (*Period.*) is a frisky pop record that delights in throwing things at the wall and seeing what sticks — while also getting a kick out of any mess that might result from a less-than-successful toss.

(*Period.*) picks up sort of where 2023's *Gag Order* — her final release on her former label, Kemosabe — left off: The music is shapeless, the wailing wordless. Eventually, the blur begins to clear. "Freedom," Kesha bellows, her voice opening wide on the vowels as the instrumentation narrows around her. Finally — after a pitchman-sounding voice trills, "Narcissism! It makes you happy!" — a beat drops in, and "Freedom" goes from amorphous to pointed, whirling through post-punk dance-floor raging and gospel-choir riffing while Kesha coolly yet saucily purrs carefree raps like "Crazy girls are better in bed/ Well, I can do one better instead."

Kesha's taste for pop experimentation is in full flower on (*Period.*), her indie debut well-timed to the long-brewing mainstream break of the hedonistic, neon-hued, kitchen-sink genre known as hyperpop. "Joyride," the album's thumping first single, blends norteña accordion blasts, huge backing vocals, and mouth-stretching enunciation; on "Yippie-Ki-Yay," Kesha takes over the DJ booth at a honky-tonk, lending her mighty voice to lyrics about "double-cupping straight gasoline" and adding foundation-rattling beats.

Things mellow out a bit as (*Period.*) draws to a close. "Glow" is serenely self-satisfied, Kesha's glitched-out voice darting through eight-bit synths. The album ends with "Cathedral," a clear-eyed look at survival that's also a reminder of Kesha's gravity-defying vocal prowess. "Every second is a new beginning/I died in the hell so I could start living again," she shouts amid droning strings and resolute piano, then declares: "I'm the cathedral." (*Period.*) shows that Kesha is ready to take in all who have believed in her. **MAURA JOHNSTON**

HOTLINE TNT'S RETRO-SHOEGAZE GLORY

★★★★

HOTLINE TNT
Raspberry Moon
THIRD MAN

THE 1990S SOUND better than ever in 2025 — Liz Phair feminist-pop plain speak, Fugazi-fathered hardcore, and in the able hands of Hotline TNT, steaming slabs of Dinosaur Jr. guitar noise buoyed by oceanic Cocteau Twins modulations. It's enough to make you miss the first Bush administration.

Hotline TNT's Will Anderson — a Midwesterner now living in New York City — was born in 1989, the year Bush got sworn in. But he channels all of that with a profound tunefulness. *Raspberry Moon* builds on the band's excellent 2023 album, *Cartwheel*. "I'll take a driving lesson," he declares on the soaring "Letter to Heaven," with drolly heartbreaking earnestness. "I'd make a bet we can fit in the van.... I'd make a joke and hope that it lands." Lyrics lean elliptical. "Julia's War" peaks with wistful reflections on, perhaps, a poignant Scrabble game? ("Mark the score/ Swap out the tiles/I won't make you change your style.")

The LP is 30 near-perfect minutes of shoegaze with eyes peeking up at the horizon. "In the zone/Locked phone/ Dirty tone/In my headphones," Anderson rhymes blissfully. It's a beautiful place to be. **WILL HERMES**

STAFF PICKS: FIVE RECENT ALBUMS WE CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF

BLONDSHELL
IF YOU ASKED FOR A PICTURE
Blondshell only knows how to deliver indie-rock excellence, swinging from dark grunge ("Arms") to Beach Boys-inspired anthems ("23's a Baby"), as she unpacks teenage trauma she didn't dare touch with her first album. She balances the emotional intensity with punchier riffs, bolder vocals, and even more humor. **MAYA GEORGI**

OBONGJAYAR
PARADISE NOW
Obongjayar is a British Nigerian artist whose second album traverses rock, funk, rap, dance music, and Afropop. Little Simz flows on the frenetic "Talk Olympics," while "Sweet Danger" mixes Afrobeat with the kind of spaghetti-Western sample you might find in a Nineties trip-hop track. It's a mix Obongjayar brilliantly pilots. **JON DOLAN**

Haim

...

HAIM, I QUIT
Recorded when all three sisters were single, *I Quit* is a summer record long on what sounds like hard-won wisdom and nuggets of deftly produced pop-rock brilliance. Not just anyone can turn a line like "I think I'm in love, but I can't stand fuckin' relationships" into beach-ready fare. **CHRISTIAN HOARD**

...

STEVE VON TILL
ALONE IN A WORLD OF WOUNDS
With the sludge-metal group Neurosis, Steve Von Till sounded broken and angry. On this quieter solo album, he sounds broken and beautiful, like if Tom Waits signed to 4AD, thanks to the strings, piano, and slow-pulsing synths backing him up. When he sings "The damage is done, I feel it in my bones," on "Horizons Undone," you know he'll be delivered a better man. **KORY GROW**

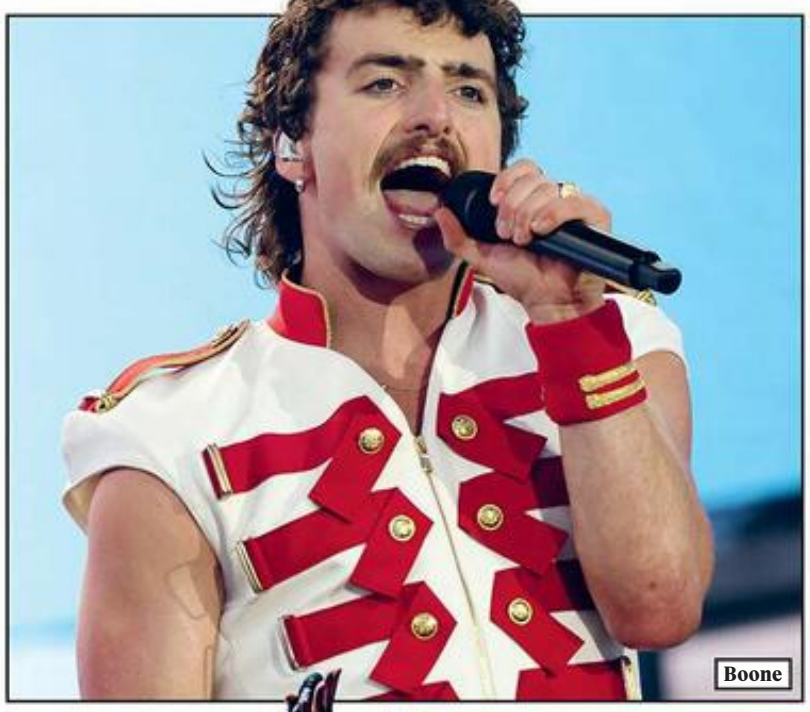
CALUM HOOD
ORDER CHAOS ORDER
The debut solo album from 5 Seconds of Summer bassist Calum Hood is a labyrinth of dizzying synths, cathartic confessions, and capsule-like storytelling. Songs like the multiperspective appraisal of addiction, "Sweetdreams," ache with unrest and delirium, but Hood finds hard-earned contentment as the dust from the chaos begins to settle. **LARISHA PAUL**

PREVIOUS PAGE: ILLUSTRATION REFERENCES AN IMAGE BY VITTORIO ZUNINO CELOTTO/GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: JIM BRITT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; TOMMASO BODDI/GETTY IMAGES

Essay

WHY DOES EVERYTHING SOUND LIKE AN AUDITION SONG FOR 'THE VOICE'?

Hits like Alex Warren's "Ordinary," Benson Boone's "Beautiful Things," and more Hot 100 tracks are just two recent examples. By Larisha Paul


Boone

Alex Warren's breakthrough single, "Ordinary," has a backstory made for TV. The 24-year-old artist wrote it about his wife, Kouvr Annon, whom he started dating when they were both 18. It wasn't the best time to jump into something so new and intense. He'd already experienced the grief of losing his father as a child, only to be kicked out of his home as soon as he reached legal age. His mother, struggling with alcoholism, wanted him gone. With nowhere to go, Warren ended up living in his car. Four months later, Annon left home to join him.

Warren's story has all the fixings of an underdog narrative: love, loss, a light at the end of the tunnel. These are the boxes producers typically hope to check when setting the scene for an audience to meet a new artist for the first time — not the producers shaping records in the recording studio but those making singing-competition television series like *The Voice* and *American Idol*. The format is predictable. The almighty TikTok algorithm assured that Warren didn't need to trauma dump on *The Voice* or *American Idol* to find his audience. But if he had, "Ordinary" would have been his ticket to a four-chair turn.

The single, which recently reached Number Two on the *Billboard* Hot 100, follows the signature singing-competition formula. The production must be sparse, so the vocal isn't overpowered. The vocal tone has to be distinct enough to spark intrigue. And within a minute and a half, it needs to build into a dramatic octave jump, one final Hail Mary in case the audition is nearing its end and no buzzers have been pressed. Warren hits every mark with "Ordinary." But he isn't alone.

Warren

The Voice audition-core songs are all over the pop charts.

Before Benson Boone sat down at the piano during his audition for *American Idol* in 2020, he admitted to the judges that he only realized he could sing a year prior. Now, Boone's breakthrough single, "Beautiful Things," is the song of choice for new batches of hopefuls and sits at Number Eight on the Hot 100, just below Teddy Swims' "Lose Control," a more soulful take on the reliable format. It starts off strong, and the standout run begins 45 seconds in. As of press time, Swims has notched 91 weeks on the chart with the record, compared with Boone's 68 weeks and Warren's 14 weeks. "Lose Control" landed both *American Idol* Season 22 contestant Ajii Hafeez and Season 23 contestant Jamier Jones a unanimous yes. Jelly Roll, another benefactor of the audition-song boost, recently appeared on *American Idol* as a musical guest and artist in residence. Even veteran pop stars Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars deployed this formula on "Die With a Smile."

Swims

The unofficial catalog of competition-series songs has continued to expand in recent years beyond classic picks like John Mayer's "Gravity," Lewis Capaldi's "Before You Go," and nearly every Ed Sheeran ballad there is. Stephen Sanchez leveraged his online audience to make a hit out of 2021's old-timey ballad "Until I Found You" after gaining popularity from covering songs by Harry Styles, James Bay, and Cage the Elephant. Now, the record is in the grouping of popular songs that have become more prevalent than the artists who first sang them, like Duncan Laurence's Eurovision-winning "Arcade" or Dean Lewis' "Be Alright," a perfect, near-blank canvas for auditions.

The way that musicians stand in front of a panel of judges isn't all that different from how they compete for attention on TikTok. Instead of trying to get them to turn their chair around, or give them a yes, they're hoping to keep you from scrolling away. At least with these shows, they're guaranteed a minute or so to make their case. Online, they have a few seconds at most. But a television audience is smaller. *American Idol*'s viewership has dipped to 4.8 million from roughly 11 million in 2014, when Remi Wolf competed, and 25 million in 2004, when Fantasia Barrino won. *The Voice* brought in an average of 7 million viewers in 2024, down from 14 million in 2014, when both Christina Grimmie and Morgan Wallen tried out. Meanwhile, TikTok has launched more careers in the past five years than *The Voice* and *American Idol* have in over a decade.

"Ordinary" is Warren's second Hot 100 entry ("Burning Down" spent 14 weeks on the chart and peaked at Number 69), but it's his first real hit. He recently released a "Wedding Version" of the track that leans into Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud" effect. Meanwhile, Boone is trying his hand with synth-y guitar pop on songs like "Sorry I'm Here for Someone Else" and "Mystical Magical." He seems to be hoping to get some more distance from the competition stage he once walked away from, only to be inadvertently dragged back by his own success. "I think I'm getting to the point where I just want people to know that there's more than just that song," he told *Rolling Stone* earlier this year. "I'm still proud of it. And I'll be performing it for a while." So will season after season of *The Voice* contestants.

How musicians stand in front of judges isn't that different from TikTok.

FROM TOP: KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES; PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES; MAURICIO SANTANA/GETTY IMAGES

CELEBRATING AMERICA — OR AT LEAST TRYING TO SURVIVE IT

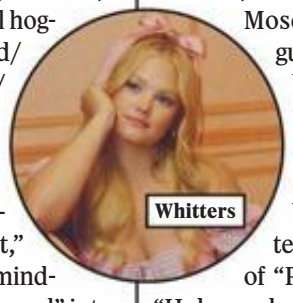
By Will Hermes

COUNTRY

Last I saw Willie Nelson, on the Outlaw Music Festival tour, he gave well-earned solo space to son **LUKAS NELSON**, who just released his first solo album. It's high time. Dude's a lifelong utility player — rock solid on guitar and vocals with the family band, while Willie circles the beat, and a team player with frequent Neil Young backing crew Promise of the Real. He's become a go-to duet partner, notably with fellow next-gen icon Sierra Ferrell. Ferrell's cameo on Nelson's new *American Romance* is "Friend in the End," a song about a bond that can see us through darkness, until "the clouds blew south/And the rain thinned out/And the sky was all sunlight again." It's a timely metaphor, and a good example of country's ability to mirror how America sees itself, accurately or wishfully.

Keeping it real: Lukas Nelson

Nelson has said the album title refers to his romance with the nation. The album's deepest song, "The Lie," is a laundry list of cultural hogwash. "Come here, kid/ Here's a story for you/ You're defined by what you do/ No one ever made it stayin' home with the kids/And if you ain't winnin'/You ain't worth shit," describing an American mindset that can turn a "simple soul" into a "spinning black hole." But *American Romance* also celebrates national beauty, pride, and wonder.



Whitters

HAILEY WHITTERS broadcast her storytelling skill on *The Dream* in 2020, and her knack for rebooting country clichés got sharpened on 2022's *Raised*. With *Corn Queen,* she supersizes it all into what should prove the most giddily virtuosic country album of the year. Stuart Duncan, Charlie Worsham, Justin Moses, and clawhammer guitar hero Molly Tuttle bring instrumental flash, and it serves songs that are poignant and hilarious by turns. When Tuttle and Whitters lean into the chorus of "Prodigal Daughter" — "Holy smoke and holy water/From doe-eyed girl to prodigal daughter/ Did a devil's dance to a fiddle in a holler/This angel's hell on the heavenly Father" — it's as fun as an old-time fall-from-grace gets. *Corn Queen* shows how modern country can celebrate tradition without being a macho flex or a cultural bulwark. It can just be a playground: for camp cosplay, strutting your stuff, and partying with friends.

Which doesn't mean Whitters can't go deep. She's a versatile writer, assisted here by Hillary Lindsey and Shane McAnally, among others. "Casseroles" is a weeper about a widower that interrogates how we care for grieving friends. "I Don't Want You," with Charles Wesley Godwin, joins a mini trend in thoughtfully dysfunctional duets. But Whitters is most winning when the lyrical liquor flows — see "Loose Strings" and "Fillin' My Cup" — and "Shotgun Wedding Baby" is the mic drop here. Any family history that begins "Eighteen don't know shit from Shinola/Well thank God my daddy had Crown in his cola" has our unshakable respect.

Waldon

ANDERSON EAST is another master craftsman, one whose concept of country leans into the old-school Southern R&B sounds Chris Stapleton reanimated in the genre's mainstream. With Dave Cobb co-producing, East really goes in on *Worthy,* paying matter-of-fact homage to Otis Redding against dukes-up Stax/Volt horn arrangements, or conjuring Roy Orbison ("Say I Love You") in orchestral pop settings that might've pleased George Martin. The writing shines, with assists from Lori McKenna ("Chasing") and Trent Dabbs, wingman on East's 2021 profound pandemic journey, *Maybe We Never Die* (he also co-wrote "High Horse" with Kacey Musgraves). In the vein of Jim Ford and Tony Joe White, East's voice is fully formed here, twining country rootstock with soul and gospel so tightly that the traditions feel inseparable, and rightly so.

East

The head turner on **KELSEY WALDON**'s haunting new album is "Falling Down," a first-person character study of hard drinking that's a shade darker than Whitters' approach. "My wife is gone, and my kids are grown/And I don't talk to them no more," Waldon sings with a plainspoken, gut-punching lilt. But *Every Ghost* is a survivor's journey, from the doom-scroll sorrow of "Nursery Rhyme" to "Lost in My Idlin'," a Hank Williams update with a tattoo-ready "wishin' I was fucked up in some honky-tonk" chorus. The set comes via John Prine's Oh Boy Records, and Waldon proves herself worthy of his truth-talking legacy. And for the record: Your American-flag decal still won't get you into heaven. R

LOOSIES
More Great Country

● **"BAD AS I USED TO BE," Chris Stapleton** Southern-soul swagger via mid-period Rolling Stones. ● **"ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE," Jim Lauderdale** A paranoid closing-time honky-tonk slow-dance weeper wondering, "What's real or deep fake." ● **"YOU AIN'T GOTTA DIE (TO BE DEAD TO ME)," Kaitlin Butts** Oklahoma songwriter lets a guy know he doesn't have to be six-feet deep to be history to her in a country lament that's becoming a TikTok sensation.

FROM TOP: SHERVIN LAINEZ; DAVID MCCLISTER; HARPER SMITH; ALYSSE GAFKJEN

SIZZLING SUMMER FINDS

The coolest picks to heat up your summer.

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TOUGH GLOVES!
Venom Steel's 2-Layer Rip Resistant Nitrile Gloves are ideal for taking on automotive, construction, painting, landscaping and around-the-home DIY projects. Available at Lowe's, AutoZone, and many of your local home improvement stores.
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REGROW HAIR UP TO 3X FASTER
It's all-natural, plastic-free, water-based & unisex. Canopy Hair Elixir restores your crowning glory with no side effects in a vegan, non-greasy, volumizing formula! In fragrance-free or scented! Code **R12** for 12% off at ***ohmmmcare.com***

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SHAKE UP SUMMER WITH ELEVATED CRAFT®
Meet your summer MVP: the Diamond Edition Hybrid Cocktail Shaker by Elevated Craft®. Sleek, insulated, and built to elevate every sip.
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ADD THESE DROPS TO EVERY DRINK!
Buoy's viral liquid electrolyte drops are clinically-proven to hydrate 64% more than water alone. No sugar, sweeteners, flavors. Add to any beverage. Use **BUOY20** for 20% off your first order.
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Kimono MicroThin Condoms, so thin you forget they're there. Silky lubrication, no strong latex smell, 5x tested ensuring safety and protection – Only Kimono MicroThin delivers barely there feelings and connection, exactly when it matters.
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LARCH WOOD END GRAIN CUTTING BOARD
Your summer BBQ's best friend — our one-hander medium standard is sleek, durable, and ready for grill-side prep or serving with serious style. Use code **#HotSum** for a 10% discount on this board.
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MANO A MANO Phoenix and Pascal square off as small-town power brokers fighting for supremacy.

The Divided States of America

With Eddington, acclaimed writer-director Ari Aster (*Hereditary, Midsommar*) gives us a different kind of horror film: a look at our fractured, fucked-up nation. By David Fear

Ari Aster would like you to go back in time. Not too far. Just five years. You probably remember May 2020: social distancing, social media diatribes, swabs being thrust into nasal cavities, "I can't breathe," uprisings in the streets. It's crazy to think all of this took place half a decade ago.

Eddington is technically a period piece, given that it unfolds over several days in the aforementioned *mensis horribilis*. It doesn't particularly feel like one, however. Take away the Covid masks, and this mix of modern-day Western, political satire, and several other genres mashed into one manic panic attack could be set last week. Same divisiveness, same finger-pointing, same lack of consensus reality, same constantly present anxiety, same president.

In the fictional small town of Eddington, New Mexico, trouble's a-brewin'. Pandemic lockdowns are in full swing, but the town sheriff, Joe Cross (Joaquin Phoenix), isn't keen on masks — also the virus is a hoax, yadda, yadda, yadda. The mayor, Ted Garcia (Pedro Pascal), tries to reason with him, but the two men have a tempestuous history. Some of it has to do with Cross' wife, Lou (Emma Stone), who once dated Garcia. A lot of it has to do with diametrically opposed viewpoints made even worse by Covid and the culture wars.

After a skirmish at the local supermarket, Cross impulsively announces via a Facebook livestream that he's running for mayor against Garcia in an upcoming election. The sheriff is soon pushed to the brink, which leads to ... well, let's just say things fall apart and the center — what little was left of it — cannot hold.

For the bulk of *Eddington*'s first half, the primary mode is broad-swipe satire, with writer-director Aster lashing out almost indiscriminately at a host of contemporary archetypes: way-too-online truthers, faux-spiritual scam artists (including a muckracker-slash-crackpot guru played by Austin Butler), zero-to-woke Gen Z activists, politicos trading on personal tragedy and carefully calibrated empathy to goose voters. (One of the funniest moments is a throwaway gag in Garcia's campaign video featuring Pascal tenderly noodling on a piano in the middle of Eddington's downtown.) The overall lack of subtlety suits the age Aster is taking to task, though it also makes everything feel slightly wobbly on its feet. The viewpoint is both-sides misanthropy.

Then a need for a cover-up causes a gear shift into Coen brothers territory, with Cross, his deputies (Micheal Ward and *Yellowstone*'s Luke Grimes), and a nosy detective (William Belleau) from the Native American sovereignty next door engaging in various shenanigans. Don't get too attached, however. It's a feint as well. There's still one more hand to be played, an unexpected narrative left turn that reveals what may be *Eddington*'s true form: a conspiracy thriller for a nation too broken to be mended, too brainwashed to come back from the brink, and too far gone to avoid manifesting its worst fears.

Butler

★★★★

EDDINGTON
In Theaters
JULY 18

Now you're fully in an Ari Aster movie, the filmmaker bringing out the formalist chops that have already made him a cult figure among cinema nerds: *Eddington*'s clothing is made of the finest sheepskin tailored for hiding the wolves already at the door. A coda reminds us that history repeats itself first as tragedy, then as podcast-celebrity fodder. Corruption is now Eddington's unavoidable currency, but let's not limit it to one small town in New Mexico. It's a horror story of a much deeper, darker strain — a possession parable in which the demons are civic as well as inner. Aster has crafted yet another movie that will chill you, unnerve you, and make you want to crawl out of your skin. You'll just wish this one didn't feel so close to being nonfiction. RS

FROM TOP: A24; RICHARD FOREMAN/A24

Egerton

RING THE ALARM

HOT ON THE TRAIL OF A COUPLE OF FIRE STARTERS

★★★½

SMOKE
Apple TV+
NEW EPISODES FRIDAYS

SMOKE, ABOUT an arson investigator (Taron Egerton) and a cop (Jurnee Smollett) teaming up to catch two unrelated serial arsonists, opens with the dictionary definition of "creativity," which is the sort of device that suggests anything but creativity is to be found. And for a couple of episodes, the show feels only slightly less hacky than the novel Egerton's character is writing. But then creator Dennis Lehane (*Black Bird*) reveals what's really going on with the investigation — no spoilers here — and suddenly the more trite elements are a feature, not a (fire)bug. The cat-and-mouse game becomes tense and fraught. Smollett and (especially) Egerton are excellent and magnetic as we plumb the depths of their characters' damaged psyches. Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine is terrifying as one of the arsonists, a chicken-joint fry cook whose only pleasure comes from watching things, and people, burn. The plot takes a few too many twists at the end, but when *Smoke* cooks, it really cooks. **ALAN SEPINWALL**

GREAT SCOT

WELCOME TO THE ISLE OF MISFIT COPS

★★★★

DEPT. Q
Netflix
ALL EPISODES NOW STREAMING

"DO YOU EVER stop and wonder why people hate you?" Carl Morck's boss asks him. Carl (Matthew Goode), a misanthropic English cop resentfully working in Scotland, considers the question, then says, "No." But by the time you finish the debut season of *Dept. Q,* you'll likely find yourself feeling deep affection not only for Carl, but also for the entire team of oddballs he reluctantly finds himself supervising. Co-creator and director Scott Frank, whose previous Netflix shows were the Western *Godless* and the chess miniseries *The Queen's Gambit,* is adapting the Danish noir novels by Jussi Adler-Olsen, about a squad of detectives who all seem like fish out of water. Carl is recovering from being shot in the neck at a crime scene, which has only made him more abrasive than usual. He's been assigned to cold cases to keep him from having to interact with other cops. Instead, he begins taking on sidekicks who are much more gifted than they seem: quiet Syrian refugee Akram (Alexej Manvelov), anxious PTSD sufferer Rose (Leah Byrne), and Carl's paralyzed, sardonic partner, Hardy (Jamie Sives). Even Carl's department-assigned therapist, Rachel (Kelly Macdonald, very funny), seems nearly as broken as her patient, but still helpful. Basically, it's *Slow Horses PD,* with more warmth and way less flatulence. The team's first case, about a long-missing prosecutor, doesn't really need nine episodes to tell. But the pleasure of extra time spent around this group of improbably brilliant, low-fi sleuths more than justifies the unnecessary story developments. *Dept. Q* is startlingly likable while also being sad, and funny, and scary, and thrilling. **A.S.**

THAT'S A RAP

THE MUSIC MAN WITH A NOT-SO-GREAT PLAN

★★★

HIGHEST 2 LOWEST
In Theaters
AUG. 22

A REMAKE-SLASH-UPDATE on Akira Kurosawa's classic 1963 thriller *High and Low,* the latest collab between Spike Lee and Denzel Washington, introduces record-industry mogul David King, a.k.a. King David, "the best ears in the business." He's a little bit Berry Gordy, a little bit Irv Gotti, and a whole lotta the movie star who gave us *Gladiator II* power broker Macrinus. King is about to make a money-movin' play to restore the name of his old company when he gets a call: His son has been kidnapped. Scrambling to get millions in cash, the exec soon finds out a mistake has been made — it's actually the son of his driver (Jeffrey Wright) who's been abducted. Now King has to decide: Blow off the ransom or do the right thing? *Highest 2 Lowest* is neither the best nor worst of Lee's films, but features two set pieces that remind us why he's in the pantheon: a dynamic ransom handoff intercut with a performance by salsa legend Eddie Palmieri, and a standoff between King and the kidnapper, played by A$AP Rocky, that ends in a rap battle. And yes, Denzel has bars. **D.F.**

Plaza and Qualley

PRETTY IN KINK

GIRLS WHO LIKE GIRLS WHO LIKE SOLVING CRIMES

★★★½

HONEY DON'T!
In Theaters
AUG. 22

THE SOPHOMORE entry in Ethan Coen and Tricia Cooke's self-proclaimed "lesbian B-movie trilogy," this whip-smart thriller centers on one Honey O'Donahue (Margaret Qualley) — a crime-solving, wisecracking gumshoe trying to figure out who left a burnt corpse in the New Mexico desert. The case soon turns out to be anything but open and shut, and ends up involving a local preacher (Chris Evans), a tough-talking cop (Aubrey Plaza), mobsters, missing teens, and a mysterious French femme fatale (Lera Abova). Unlike the duo's seven-car pile-up *Drive-Away Dolls* (2024), this somewhat messy attempt to mix Coen-esque mayhem with sapphic erotica shakes the ingredients into a far more satisfying cocktail; you'll likely be talking about the steamy sex scene between Qualley and Plaza for a while. But the real draw is Qualley, playing this P.I. as an update of a noir staple who's equal parts screwball and hard-boiled. Give us a whole other trilogy devoted to this sultry, take-no-shit sleuth. **D.F.**

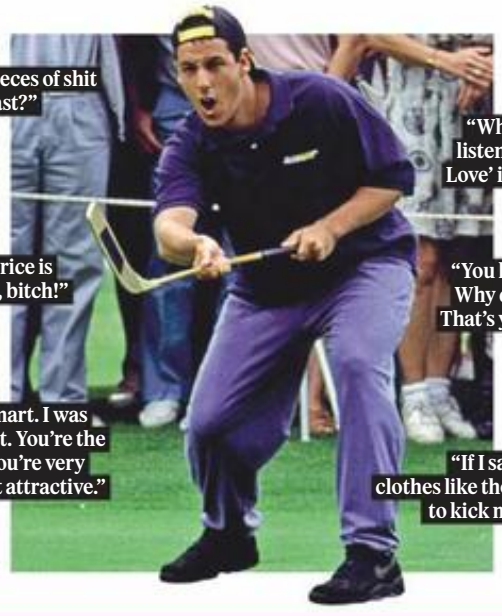
IN BRIEF
More to See

JURASSIC PARK: REBIRTH (July 2) revives those angry dinos and adds Scarlett Johansson and Mahershala Ali into the mix as black-ops mercenaries. ● Sterling K. Brown co-stars in Hulu's **WASHINGTON BLACK** (July 23), about a boy who escapes slavery in Barbados in the 1800s and winds up in Nova Scotia. ● On July 25, **FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS** finally brings Marvel's legendary first family into the MCU, complete with a retro 1960s vibe. ● Hulu revives **KING OF THE HILL** (Aug. 4) to see how Hank, Bobby, and Peggy react to present-day America. ● Benedict Cumberbatch and Olivia Colman turn marriage into a winner-take-all battle in **THE ROSES** (Aug. 29), an update of the Michael Douglas-Kathleen Turner black comedy from 1989. Ⓡ

SANDLER TRAP

HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN

With the July 25 release of 'Happy Gilmore 2,' the sequel to Adam Sandler's 1996 golf movie, we celebrate Happy's best quotes from the original


"You eat pieces of shit for breakfast?"

"What? Friends listen to 'Endless Love' in the dark."

"The price is wrong, bitch!"

"You little son of a bitch ball! Why don't you just go *home*? That's your *home*! Are you too good for your *home*?"

"I'm stupid. You're smart. I was wrong. You were right. You're the best. I'm the worst. You're very good-looking. I'm not attractive."

"If I saw myself in clothes like those, I'd have to kick my own ass."

FROM TOP: ROBERT FALCONER/APPLE TV+; FOCUS FEATURES; UNIVERSAL PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION

20 BEST MOVIES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

The cinematic masterpieces of the past 25 years span thrillers, romances, satires, and more

1 THERE WILL BE BLOOD

2007

Paul Thomas Anderson's origin story of American avarice towers like a derrick over our new millennium, its shadow as imposing as the silhouette that Daniel Day-Lewis' mad oil baron casts upon his own era. Though loosely pulled from the pages of Upton Sinclair, this character study of greed incarnate has twisted into a disturbing prophecy of right now. What could be more relevant to the 21st century than a drama about a vampiric capitalist coming into a world as a creator and leaving as a destroyer? **A.A. DOWD**

2 IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE

2000

Set in 1962 Hong Kong, Wong Kar-wai's cinematic tone poem watches as two neighbors (Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Maggie Cheung) discover that their respective workaholic, AWOL spouses are having an affair. They're inevitably drawn together, but any attempt at real connection is destined to end in mutually assured alienation. Which, in Wong's cockeyed world of unfulfilled romantics, is exactly the point. Think of it as holy loneliness: rapturous, intoxicating, and bittersweetly sublime. **STEPHEN GARRETT**

3 MOONLIGHT

2016

Charting a sensitive young Florida kid's rocky road to manhood through three time periods and three different actors, Barry Jenkins' sophomore movie (an adaptation of playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney's little-known work *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*) refracts the agonies and ecstasies of Black life through a very subjective prism. Yet this tender, sympathetic look at a human being finally coming into his own couldn't feel more universal. Every shot looks ravishing. Every character contains multitudes. **DAVID FEAR**

4 PARASITE

2019

Bong Joon Ho's hilarious, terrifying, and violent satire broke through in a way few South Korean films have for American audiences, ultimately taking home Best Picture at the Academy Awards. A working-class family insinuates itself into a wealthy family's extravagant home, slowly making the mansion their own. From there, things get wilder, with one of the most memorable twists in recent history. There are no heroes or villains in Bong's pitiless take on haves and have-nots, only flawed humans. **ESTHER ZUCKERMAN**

5 Y TU MAMÁ TAMBIÉN

2001

Before Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón won two Best Director Oscars and conquered Hollywood, he gifted the world with this raunchy rom-com about two buddies (Gael García Bernal, Diego Luna) sweet-talking an older woman (Maribel Verdú) into an impromptu road trip. Beyond the steamy threesomes and jerking-off jokes, Cuarón's horny yet humane coming-of-age drama captures a snapshot of the south-of-the-border country at a time of economic inequality and widespread political protests. **TIM GRIERSON**

6 4 MONTHS, 3 WEEKS, AND 2 DAYS

2007

Cristian Mungiu's harrowing drama about a woman (Anamaria Marinca) helping a friend (Laura Vasiliu) procure an illegal abortion during the Ceaușescu era is a prime example of why the Romanian New Wave that sprang up in the 2000s was the single most vital world-cinema movement of the decade. It's also a sobering reminder that in a totalitarian regime, all politics are personal — and everything personal is instantly politicized. **D.F.**

7 MAD MAX: FURY ROAD

2015

His name is Max, and his world is fire and blood. Watch George Miller's go-for-broke addition to his ongoing Mad Max franchise and you feel like every one of its old-school practical stunts and choreographed clashes of chrome and bones is happening in some sort of postapocalyptic documentary. It's a turbocharged version of an action movie that makes every kinetic chase scene, explosion, and death-defying bit of business feel crafted with both tremendous care and total abandon. **D.F.**

8 YI YI: A ONE AND A TWO

2000

It begins at a wedding and finishes at a funeral. In between those poles, this rich drama (the final work from Taiwanese filmmaker Edward Yang) about the Jians, a middle-class Taipei family experiencing a gauntlet of emotions over the course of one eventful year, crams new friendships, first dates, and a romantic reunion so perfectly realized it could have been its own mini masterpiece. To sink into the movie's insights is to be grateful that Yang shared them before he went, and bitter that he didn't have time to share more. **A.A.D.**

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: PARAMOUNT/EVERETT COLLECTION, 2; BAC FILMS; MIRMAX/EVERETT COLLECTION; JASIN BOLAND/WARNER BROS.; DAVID BORNFRIEND/A24; NEON; WINSTAR CINEMA/EVERETT COLLECTION. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: UNIVERSAL PICTURES; SONY PICTURES CLASSICS; TOHO; ALISON ROSA/LONG STRANGE TRIP LLC; IFC FILMS; MERRICK MORTON/COLUMBIA TRISTAR; ANDREW COOPER/SONY PICTURES; MERRICK MORTON/PARAMOUNT PICTURES; ESPN FILMS; WILSON WEBB/THE WEINSTEIN CO.; FOCUS FEATURES; DAGWOOF PICTURES

9 MULHOLLAND DRIVE

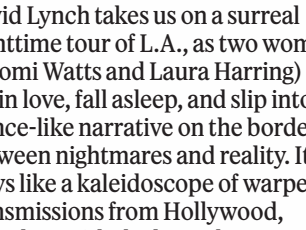
2001

David Lynch takes us on a surreal nighttime tour of L.A., as two women (Naomi Watts and Laura Harring) fall in love, fall asleep, and slip into a trance-like narrative on the border between nightmares and reality. It plays like a kaleidoscope of warped transmissions from Hollywood, complete with the legendary MGM-musical hoofer Ann Miller as a salty landlady and Billy Ray Cyrus punching out Justin Theroux. Of all of Lynch's classics, this one most captured the dark power of his genius. Silencio. **ROB SHEFFIELD**

10 BOYHOOD

2014

Richard Linklater has always been fascinated by the passage of time (see his *Before* trilogy). But his magnum opus takes things one giant step further, as he charts the growth of a kid named Mason (Ellar Coltrane) from boy to young man. The twist: He actually filmed the actor, along with Ethan Hawke and Patricia Arquette, sporadically over that same real-life 12-year time frame, and stitched everything together as if it were a moving-picture scrapbook. A complete reinvention of the coming-of-age film. **JAKE KRING-SCHREIFELS**



11 O.J.: MADE IN AMERICA

2016

Ezra Edelman's essential, nearly eight-hour portrait of Orenthal James Simpson — NFL Hall of Famer, rental-car pitchman, actor, accused double murderer — was more than just a fancy, marathon-length ESPN *30 for 30*. This multichapter look at the Juice singlehandedly changed the way that we looked at serialized nonfiction, and turned Simpson's rise and fall into a referendum on how we talk about race, class, celebrity, and justice in the land of the free and home of the brave. Absolutely stunning. **D.F.**

12 A SEPARATION

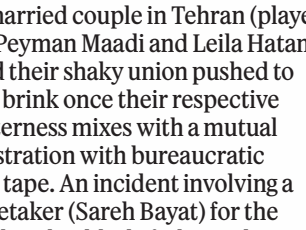
2011

A married couple in Tehran (played by Peyman Maadi and Leila Hatami) find their shaky union pushed to the brink once their respective bitterness mixes with a mutual frustration with bureaucratic red tape. An incident involving a caretaker (Sareh Bayat) for the husband's elderly father only complicates things further. Writer-director Asghar Farhadi's domestic drama was a milestone in modern Iranian cinema, and a prime example of mining tension from the simplest of conversational scenes. **D.F.**

13 THE SOCIAL NETWORK

2010

This Aaron Sorkin-scripted, David Fincher-directed film tells the origin story of Facebook — and consequently, much of 21st-century life. It's a hilarious and highly poignant satire about how we got to this cursed moment of always-online life and tech bros drunk with power. The film's unforgettable final image of founder Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg), alone at his laptop and refreshing a browser page in the hopes to make a single human connection, has only become more resonant as years go by. **KEITH PHIPPS**



14 CAROL

2015

Todd Haynes turns an obscure Patricia Highsmith novel — one published under a pseudonym, and that doesn't feature the pulpy undertones usually associated with the *Talented Mr. Ripley* writer's work — into a deceptively epic queer romance, in which Rooney Mara's shopgirl and Cate Blanchett's society matron fall truly, madly, deeply in love. Haynes' beautiful evocation of 1950s melodrama makes this a genuine throwback masterpiece. **E.Z.**

15 SPIRITED AWAY

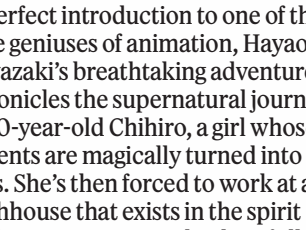
2001

A perfect introduction to one of the true geniuses of animation, Hayao Miyazaki's breathtaking adventure chronicles the supernatural journey of 10-year-old Chihiro, a girl whose parents are magically turned into pigs. She's then forced to work at a bathhouse that exists in the spirit realm — a paranormal palace full of witches, frogs, and cloaked figures. It's the Japanese anime master's work at its finest, a family-friendly fantasy blessed with a deep understanding of adolescent awe and profound terror. **J.K.S.**

16 ONCE UPON A TIME ... IN HOLLYWOOD

2019

Quentin Tarantino gives us his memory movie and rewinds to L.A. circa 1969 — a world filled with Top 40 radio, workaday actors, ragged stuntmen, and the Manson Family circus hovering on the periphery. It's a love letter to a bygone industry, co-signed by three of today's hugest A-listers (Leo DiCaprio! Brad Pitt! Margot Robbie!). But it's also a rewrite to history that turns a landmark tragedy into a happily-ever-after wish upon a star. **D.F.**



17 ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND

2004

Director Michel Gondry and screenwriter Charlie Kaufman's tragicomic romance asks: Would you scrub an ex from your brain if you could? A heartbroken Jim Carrey decides to undergo a treatment to erase any memory of old girlfriend Kate Winslet. Then he changes his mind, and that's when this movie kicks into existential overdrive. **S.G.**

18 INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS

2013

Oscar Isaac transforms a disgruntled singer-songwriter, hustling in the early-Sixties Greenwich Village folk scene, into the patron saint of self-sabotaging artists time forgot. Joel and Ethan Coen had done cracked character studies before — *Barton Fink*, *A Serious Man* — but never with this much compassion for the many long-suffering nobodies who never got their big break. You'll forever think differently about the mysteries of luck, the fickleness of fate, and the guy who eclipses our hero: a newbie troubadour named Bob Dylan. **T.G.**

19 ZODIAC

2007

Forgoing the lurid sensationalism of his earlier serial-killer thriller *Se7en*, director David Fincher turns the real-life rampage and sprawling manhunt for the early-Seventies Bay Area boogeyman known as the Zodiac Killer into a perversely detailed procedural, with Jake Gyllenhaal, Robert Downey Jr., and Mark Ruffalo each going down the rabbit hole and resurfacing with more questions than answers. With its evocation of a dawning tabloid era, it's like a 1970s nightmare reimagined for the age of true-crime obsessiveness. **A.A.D.**

20 THE ACT OF KILLING

2012

Revisiting the mass murders committed in the wake of a 1965 attempted coup of the Indonesian government, filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer talks several of the actual perpetrators of these crimes into giving on-the-record interviews. Then he offers them the chance to reenact the atrocities in the form of Hollywood movies, complete with musical numbers. The result falls somewhere between documentary and terrible dream — and proves that truth has a way of bubbling up to the surface no matter what. **K.P.**

To see our full list of the top 50 films of the 21st century, visit RollingStone.com.

The Artists You Love and the Stories That Matter

RollingStone MUSIC NOW

Hosted by senior writer Brian Hiatt, our *Rolling Stone Music Now* podcast takes you inside the biggest stories in music, featuring interviews with top artists, expert insights, and much more

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MAKING AMERICA BACKWARD AGAIN

Continued from 27

ment by and for oligarchs. That is, we're looking at a cabal of billionaires who want to get even richer. They want to slash government spending, especially spending that helps the vulnerable, to make room for tax cuts. They want to dismantle government so it can be privatized, with contracts going to them and their friends.

There's clearly something to that. But I don't think that's the whole story. It doesn't explain the trade war, which hurts almost everyone. It doesn't explain why these people want to make infectious disease great again and destroy American science.

What I think is happening is the triumph of resentment. Try reading Trump's Truth Social posts, or Musk's tweets, or RFK Jr.'s speeches, and the overwhelming impression you get is that these are angry, insecure people. "Perhaps Harvard should lose its Tax Exempt Status and be Taxed as a Political Entity if it keeps pushing political, ideological, and terrorist inspired/supporting 'Sickness?'" Trump said on Truth Social. Does this sound like a rational policymaker? Or like someone with a grudge?

These men clearly aren't suffering from "economic anxiety." They're wealthy and hold positions of great power, and are likely enriching themselves through epic corruption as we speak. Yet anyone who's spent time around men in privileged positions knows how easy it is for some of them to feel bitter and angry, despite lives 99.9 percent of the population would envy, because privilege isn't as fulfilling as they thought it would be. (Hey, I've spent much of my life around elite academics, and I see it all the time.)

The common feature of MAGA's leading figures is that they appear to feel that they have, as Trump would put it, been treated "very badly." Trump senses that many people consider him an ignorant boor, and it drives him crazy. Musk is furious that he no longer receives the admiration he did when Tesla was cool. RFK Jr. seems determined to prove that he isn't the crank he is.

I would argue that almost all of the administration's policies have been shaped by this resentment. Trump is going wild on tariffs in large part to get back at economists who think they know how these things work better than a real-estate developer who doesn't read much. Musk wrecked the federal government to prove that he really is a genius who understands everything better than anyone else. RFK is destroying medical research to silence anyone who might contradict his snake oil.

Obviously there's something deeply wrong with a body politic that could put such people in power. I do, however, have enough faith in America to believe that their reign will eventually end. In the meantime, however, they're doing incredible damage. And I don't expect to see a full recovery in my lifetime. R

BILLIONAIRES: NOT LIKE US
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tute. "They were like some fringe group that nobody took seriously," she says of how the tech billionaires who talked up AGI were viewed by those who worked in her field. "Everybody sort of laughed at them out of the room. But because of the money, the billions of dollars that were going into it, they started slowly taking over. Fast-forward to now, this conversation about superintelligence is basically mainstream."

Yet, Gebru argues, the conversation ignores what AI like ChatGPT really is: Not a form of intelligence — which, in and of itself, is almost impossible to define — but rather a large language model that simply scrapes the (inherently flawed) internet and predicts the most likely sequence of words. We are made to think that AI is "thinking," but that's just marketing, and misleading marketing at that.

"I THINK THE MOST RADICAL IDEA IS A RADICAL UNPLUGGING, THE REMOVAL OF OURSELVES FROM THEIR PLATFORMS."

A machine that doesn't really think at all can't teach itself to think better. And it certainly can't figure out how to alter the habitability of Mars.

Likewise, though Altman claimed in January that nuclear fusion — potentially an inexhaustible source of energy — was only a few years away, the scientists working to bring it about scoff at that timeline (there's a joke that it's been 30 years away for the past 60 years). Crypto continues to have dubious (legal) utility as compared with other forms of currency, but in 2023, it gobbled up as much energy as the entire continent of Australia. In October, Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google, said the solution to the climate crisis was to use more energy: Since we aren't going to meet our climate goals anyway, we should pump energy into AI that might one day evolve to solve the problem for us. ("Yeah, that's a quote that he gave in public without, like, a mask over his face or anything," says Becker. "And he still walks around, unashamed.") In his first week in office, Trump invited Altman, Oracle chairman Larry Ellison, and SoftBank CEO Masayoshi Son to the White House to gleefully announce the building of 20 more AI data centers.

"First, you kill the environment in the process of getting to so-called AGI, and then that AGI is going to somehow magically stop forest fires and storms and the wind?" Gebru asks, dumbfounded. "It doesn't make any sense. There are no specifics of how this could happen."

Meanwhile, in the name of bringing about an imaginary techno-utopia, real damage is being done. Real people lose their jobs to AI or suffer discrimination thanks to the racism, sexism, and classism the technology replicates from its internet scrubs. Real energy is being wasted. Real problems are being brushed aside in favor of ones that have been invented by the men who've tapped themselves to solve them.

"When you're aiming at utopia, it offers the promise of transcendence of all limits and the ability to ignore everything else," Becker argues. "If you know what the end goal is, if you know what the future holds, then you don't have to worry about laws. You don't have to worry about morality." And you certainly don't have to worry about building a library. It's survival of the fittest on a disastrous, interplanetary scale.

It's possible that all this nonsense might someday soon get seen for what it is. Trump seems to be tiring of these guys (as I write this, Musk is skulking back to Tesla to presumably try to jump-start its stock). And it's possible that enough people could rise up and speak out and push back against the technocratic takeover that strength in numbers would prevail. The Gilded Age ushered in the Progressive Era; it stands to reason that such a shift could happen again.

But it's also possible that a threshold could be reached in which the amount of wealth these men possess exceeds the power of any possible guardrails even a collection of nations could devise. In the amount of time it took me to write that sentence, Musk's fortune grew by about $30,000. In the time it took you to read that last one, he gained about $3,000 more. In other words, we may eventually reach a sort of wealth singularity, a point when the wealth of a few grows so exponentially that it basically reaches the point of infinity. It seems safe to assume that *that* singularity is actually the one that is most near.

After my conversation with the man in the glass tower, we rode the elevator together down through the clouds and back to the Earth's surface, where the building's lobby teemed with Earthlings going blithely about their day, tiny computers clutched in their hands. I asked the man if he saw any solution to the predicament we were in.

"I do think that the most radical idea is a radical unplugging, the radical removal of ourselves from all of their platforms. There would be a manifesto: These things, you cannot do."

Somewhere nearby, a phone dinged. The man exhaled deeply. His plan might work, theoretically, but it seemed as likely as living on Mars. ®

SABRINA CARPENTER
Continued from 46

peonies that cover nearly every inch of the table, with lit taper candles and bowls of citrus thrown into the mix, like a scene from *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

Double doors lead out to the outdoor garden, while a set of stairs leads up into a room above, where a party starts to filter in. Carpenter covers her face, shielding herself from the line of guests walking up the stairs. "L-O-L, it's girls' night," she observes. "Me not turning around out of fear." Later, she points to the ceiling, gesturing to the rowdy noise. "Why aren't we celebrating like that?"

Carpenter splits her time between L.A. and New York. It's easier for her to avoid the paparazzi in New York, particularly in the Financial District, where she's lived since 2021. She rented an Airbnb for two months to write *Emails I Can't Send* and never moved out. "Thankfully, the owners really took a liking to my sister and I," she says.

She's been coming to Palma ever since then, explaining it's owned by her friend Amber Mark's family (Mark is also a musician). "The chef told me three times that he has a cauliflower that you like," the waiter tells her, before he brings out the pan-roasted vegetable, as well as an order of arancini and crispy artichokes.

Carpenter is selective about when she drinks, especially on tour, claiming she can feel the substance decomposing her body. "People are already so critical of the way I look every other day that when I don't feel good from the inside out, it's just a nightmare, and it can get dark out there," she says.

We order mocktail Aperol spritzes, extolling the benefits of not drinking — from the quality of sleep to the clean headspace. "But for me, if I'm out with friends and it's for the plot, let's do it," she says. "By the way, if I'm ever at home alone with a full bottle of wine and no occasion and no one to talk to, call the police."

When Carpenter is home, there's another side of her that fans rarely see — the quiet and introspective version who isn't inserting innuendos and cracking one-liners. Her stage presence, she says, is "not a projection, it's how I feel. But you can't possibly be that energetic and happy all the time. So when I get home, I can be the really toned-down, quiet, chill version of myself. I love entertaining, but I also sometimes love shutting the fuck up and being to myself. Observing, reading, watching, and listening. I spend a lot of time in my own head, which is good and bad."

You can sense Carpenter's more serious side in some of her songs, like the stunning "Lie to Girls," off *Short n' Sweet*. Penned with Antonoff and Allen, it's one of her strongest songwriting achievements, a heartbreak anthem about how women often go to great lengths to avoid the "ugly truth" about their shitty partners. "You don't have to lie to girls/ If they like you, they'll just lie to themselves," she sings.

On tour, Carpenter performs it on an acoustic guitar, a stripped-down, intimate moment she says is rarely captured on video or photographed. That's because a majority of the focus is on the sexual nature of the tour, from her wardrobe (corseted bodysuits glittering in sequins, garter belts, lacy baby-doll nighties) to the horny choreography (that word, by the way, literally flashes across the screen at one point).

If "Juno" — an indie-pop gem from *Short n' Sweet* that's named after the 2007 teen-pregnancy film, where she sings "I might let you make me Juno" — wasn't explicit enough, she takes it a step further.

As she sings "Wanna try out some freaky positions? Have you ever tried this one?" she acts out sex positions, changing it up every time (and before you ask, yes, fans have compiled them online). For "Bed Chem," Carpenter ends the track on a heart-shaped bed, staging intercourse with a male dancer behind a curtain. These viral moments have resulted in Carpenter being shamed online, with some parents even deeming her shows inappropriate for children.

"I'VE NEVER LIVED IN A TIME WHERE WOMEN HAVE BEEN MORE PICKED APART AND SCRUTINIZED."

"It's always so funny to me when people complain," she says. "They're like, 'All she does is sing about this.' But those are the songs that you've made popular. Clearly *you* love sex. You're obsessed with it. It's in my show. There's so many more moments than the 'Juno' positions, but those are the ones you post every night and comment on. I can't control that. If you come to the show, you'll [also] hear the ballads, you'll hear the more introspective numbers. I find irony and humor in all of that, because it seems to be a recurring theme. I'm not upset about it, other than I feel mad pressure to be funny sometimes."

This is an important topic for Carpenter, and we discuss it again on the phone a few weeks later. "I don't want to be pessimistic, but I truly feel like I've never lived in a time where women have been picked apart more, and scrutinized in every capacity. I'm not just talking about me. I'm talking about every female artist that is making art right now."

I tell Carpenter that the conversation is fitting, considering that down on Cornelia Street, fans are posing outside of Swift's former home and taking photos. "That's what I'm saying," she says. "We're in such a weird time where you would think it's girl power, and women supporting women, but in reality, the second you see a picture of someone wearing a dress on a carpet, you have to say everything mean about it in the first 30 seconds that you see it."

This echoes "Needless to Say," the vinyl-only bonus track to *Short n' Sweet,* where Carpenter takes aim at the online scrutiny she faces ("A pretty dress, an awkward angle/I bet you zoomed in close and held it up to show all of your friends," she sings). "It's something that keeps coming back," she says. "We just have to grow thicker skin, but they don't have to learn how to shut their mouths."

Carpenter looks up to Parton in this regard. "She's always dealt with it with wit and humor," she says. The duo spent hours together in a pickup truck while filming the video for "Please Please Please," having such a deep conversation that they muted their mics for a portion of it. "I bet they're squirmin' now, dying to know what we're talking about!" Parton says, recalling how she felt during the truck conversation. "There was a lot we didn't mind, but there's just such a thing as your privacy. I remember saying, 'Don't ever sacrifice your morals and your soul and your principles and your own values.' I'll always treasure what we did. I'll hold her precious in my heart and in my head."

For Carpenter, life as a pop star means living with bits of insanity and chaos, with having to "fight off video-game demons" every couple of hours. "What people probably don't realize is the more eyes you have on you, the harder it is to love what you're doing, and you have to keep fighting to still love making things and to still love performing," she says. "Because the critical sides start to taint it, and they start to make things less fun. They start to make friendships and relationships less fun and enjoyable. [But] there's still so much light and goodness in this, if you're doing it for the reason of you love it and can't live without it."

She's been trying to stay in that headspace this year, as she prepares for this new era. Like her cold plunges, she's jumping in and bracing for whatever happens. "In the timespan of a year, you're able to feel incredible about yourself, terrible about yourself, and everything in between," she'd said at dinner. "It's definitely not always great, and I don't always feel like I know what's happening. But right now, today at Palma with this spritz, I feel like I have some clarity on what I want, at least for the near future, which is rare. I'm so lucky to be in a place right now where I feel present."

But she also knows that five years from now, she could look back on this moment and find the joke, the way she's always done. What would she say to herself?

She smiled.

"Fucking liar."

VYBZ KARTEL

Continued from 108

years. His legal team argued that the judge and prosecution had violated the Fundamental Rights and Freedoms Charter, a 2011 constitutional amendment that guarantees a fair trial. But a panel of three judges confirmed the verdict in 2020. As a last resort, a team that included his new lawyer, human rights attorney Isat Buchanan, brought the matter to the U.K.'s Privy Council, which is the highest court of appeal in Jamaica and other Commonwealth nations.

"Do you see a 238 on my face?" Kartel asks me while pointing to his cheekbone under his shades. "That's the paragraph that freed me." He got the tattoo months before the case was reviewed by the Privy Council. In the judgment document that cemented his conviction, paragraph 238 deals with the trial judge's decision to proceed with the case despite the bribery allegation. "They justified, surprisingly, the whole idea of jury tampering," Buchanan argues over a video call.

Last March, the council determined that the jury-management issues could not be ignored. "This was an infringement of the defendants' fundamental right to a fair hearing [under] the Jamaican Constitution," the justices wrote, overturning the convictions of all four men. The Jamaican Court of Appeals concluded that Kartel would not have to sit for a new trial. Enough state resources had been spent.

Kartel's physical health played a role in the court's decision not to retry the case. In the months before he was released, his doctor reported that his heart was operating at 37 percent capacity. Graves' disease made him physically weak and communicating difficult. "My doctor explained to me that due to ... solitary confinement my health has deteriorated and it is critical that I receive surgical intervention within 12 months time as I might suffer from life impacting consequences," he wrote in an affidavit to the Privy Council.

In 1993, an Amnesty International delegation was deployed to Jamaica after four men on death row were shot in their cells by prison guards. The organization reported that there was "cause for concern" about the St. Catherine correctional center. "None of the cells [had] integral sanitation," the assessment said. "The prison is in a chronic state of general disrepair with broken plumbing, piles of refuse and open sewers."

Thirty years later, Kartel says he was subject to many of the same merciless conditions. "I had to urinate in a bottle ... and pass my stool in a scandal bag ... this contributed greatly to the deterioration of my health," he testified. Buchanan, who is running for the opposition party in the parliamentary elections this coming fall, sued the government so Kartel could have access to a toilet. "The rest of persons who are not him, who have to live in inhumane conditions — they still have to pass their feces and their urine in plastic bags or hold it until the cell is open," Buchanan tells me. "We have to fix our prison system."

Around the time of Kartel's Freedom Street concert, radio ads in Jamaica advocated for total independence from the United Kingdom. The commercials were sponsored by the government's own Ministry of Constitutional Affairs. "The irony is they have a track record of breaching constitutional rights and losing in the courts," Buchanan says. "Jamaica is not ready. We need a little more education on what humanity looks like."

Before prison, Kartel wrote that it was time for Jamaica to break away from the Commonwealth, the fragile remains of the British Empire. But his experience with the criminal-justice system and the Privy Council's role in freeing him changed his perspective. "I'm a man, and I can say this." He pauses and adjusts his sunglasses. "I don't share that sentiment [anymore]. At least not now," he tells me. "It's a pity I had to go to England."

In both his book and his music, Kartel has taken on Jamaica's social divide. Working-class communities, he wrote, buzz with the "burning internal desire for better, kindled with the feeling of stagnation coming from the stink of gullies or dumps that some of us are forced to live beside."

The other, more privileged demographic is what Kartel describes as "society people," descendants of the politicians and wealthy citizens who led Jamaica's two main political factions — the conservative-leaning Jamaica Labour Party and the democratic-socialist People's National Party — in the 1960s and 1970s. The elections that followed Jamaica's independence from the U.K., in 1962, were corrupted with violence. Politically affiliated gangs threatened or killed community members who didn't vote and terrorized the opposition. At least 800 people were murdered during the general-election season in 1980.

In 2020, Prime Minister Andrew Holness, representing the JLP, and Peter Phillips, the leader of the PNP at the time, signed a pact to enshrine their commitment to a peaceful election season. Holness enlisted musicians like Shenseea and Skillibeng to record dubplates, or audio clips, to promote his campaign. "Artists should be free to express their political opinions without fear," Holness said. "The music needs to do that because it is the most powerful tool of communication we have."

Even though Jamaica closed 2024 with its lowest unemployment rate in history, many young people, especially in rural areas, remain disenfranchised. Some clean windshields in Kingston or engage in lottery scams; others sell provisions in Coronation Market. Dancehall is an alluring option for many. They can create music, control their own time, and if they're savvy, earn a living. Kartel implores young artists to advocate for themselves. Dancehall music is "not just something for us to be in a lane somewhere around the sound system," he tells me. "This thing we have of ours can take us to the world."

Kartel compares himself to other groundbreaking Jamaican artists whose music challenged political norms, like his former mentor, Bounty Killer. "A lot of his catalog is gangster lyrics. A lot of my catalog is X-rated. All of Bob Marley's catalog is conscious," he says between sips of tonic water. "We all had one thing in common — the influence. That's why we got the pressure," he says. All three "have the ability to influence the minds of the man in the street," he tells me. "Therein lies the problem. We have the voice to say what people are saying."

Kartel's surprise party is held at a restaurant with a white marble interior and black furniture. Outside, a cigar bar is set up near a huge balloon installation promoting Str8 Vybz.

Kartel arrives after 11 p.m., wearing a designer button-down and sunglasses. "I hate surprises," he whispers. "I don't like people planning things around me and I don't know about it." After his mother leads everyone in singing a birthday song, he walks through some drapes to a more private section where his family is seated.

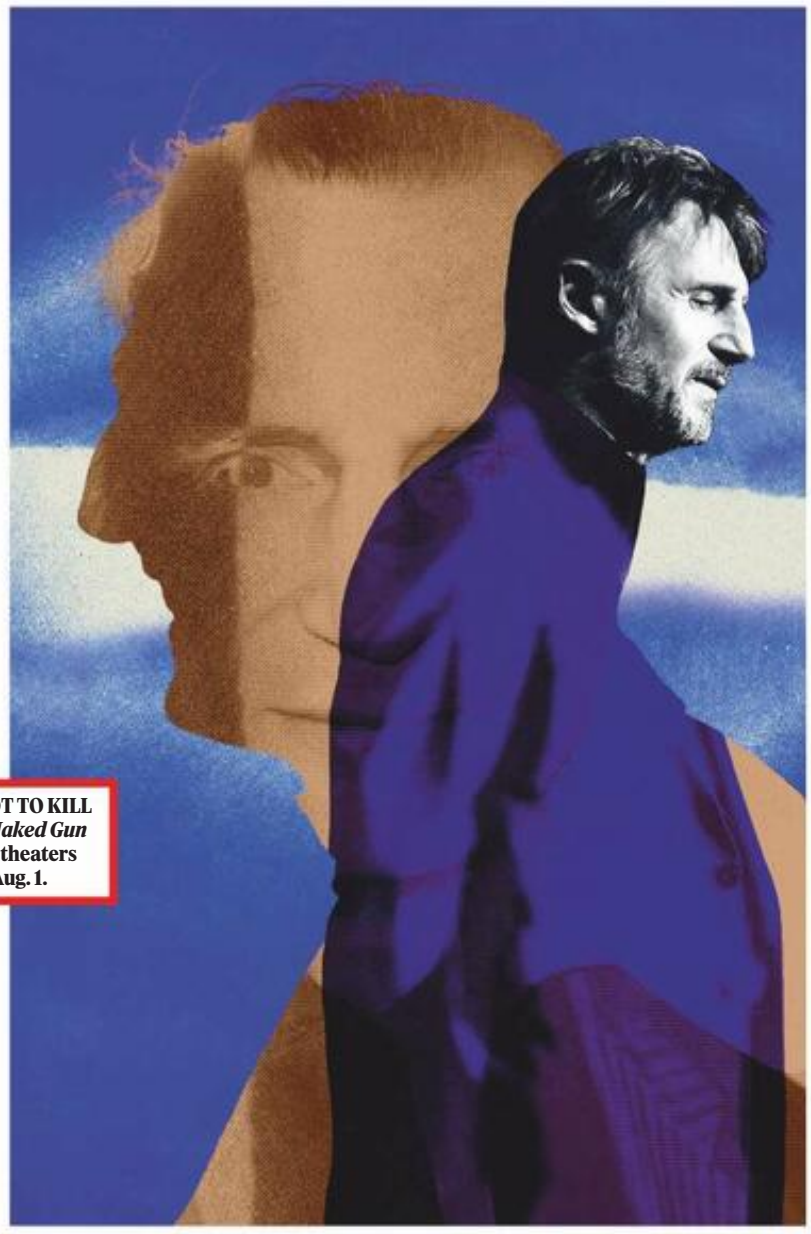
"Ah, who yuh a look fuh? Motha?" a relative says, pointing me in her direction. Theresa Wilson Palmer has a protective energy about her. She sits surrounded by relatives while she stirs her drink with a cocktail straw. She peers at me through her red eyeglasses and tells me that she was very glad to see Adidja reunited with their family. She shares the recipe for the fish she had cooked for him when he came home: "Jus' a likkle scallion, pimento leaf, butter, salt, pepper. Steam it down."

The following night, Kartel hosts his official birthday party at MECA, the venue owned by his *Voice of the Jamaican Ghetto* co-author. By 1 a.m., the place is crammed with people. Massive orange neon signs that read "Gaza" and "Worl Boss" hang from the banisters.

Eventually, Kartel arrives wearing a suit with his locs braided back. Some of the biggest dancehall artists are in his section, including Popcaan. Several bottles of prosecco decorated with sparklers walk by. Kartel hops on the mic and expresses gratitude for everyone who believed in him. Later in the evening, he leaves with a security escort. Everyone seems to follow him out as if they were his disciples.

As the party goes on without him, I think back to our conversation in the lounge outside, when he talked about the role he plays in Jamaican culture, and why his music remains so controversial. "Dancehall represents what? The biggest demographic — poor people, ghetto people," he told me. "And not only represents ghetto people, but it also represents ghetto people becoming successful, ghetto people moving up on that social echelon. A lot of people don't like that."

"I play every scene as serious as I can."



SHOOT TO KILL
The Naked Gun **is in theaters Aug. 1.**

THE LAST WORD

LIAM NEESON

The action hero, 72, talks about taking on comedy with *The Naked Gun,* the sport he's terrible at, and his very particular set of skills

What's the worst part of success?
Someone once said, "It's terrible when people are talking about you, and it's even worse when they're not talking about you."

Do you have any acting heroes?
I'll go back to the old days, Forties, Fifties. I did very much like Spencer Tracy as a performer, because he was always so real. Without putting on false noses and strange accents and all this sort of shit — he was just always present and real.

How have you tried to embody that in your work?
If the audience believes the words coming out of your mouth, that's good enough for me.

You haven't done a lot of comedy. What intrigued you about starring in a *Naked Gun* reboot?
I was approached by Seth MacFarlane to gauge my interest in this. And I did see the original productions, which I enjoyed — they were a good giggle. So, I said I was interested, and we left it at that. Then I got the script, and I thought it was funny, certainly a bunch of giggles.

You were hilarious as yourself in Ricky Gervais' series *Life's Too Short*. The conceit was that you wanted to get into comedy and were terrible at it. What do you remember about filming that?
People thought it was improvised, but it was far from it. Every comma, semicolon was written by Ricky. You know, I was a bit nervous about doing it because I thought I'd be laughing all the time. But Ricky was the one that was laughing all the time. It gave me confidence.

What comedies are you a fan of?
As a kid, I'd go to a lot of Saturday matinees, and I adored Laurel and Hardy, those late-1920s, 1930s, little 20-minute comedies they shot. Bud Abbott and Lou Costello. Then more modern day, *Tropic Thunder,* Ben Stiller's film, always makes me laugh. Will Ferrell movies. Mike Myers, *Austin Powers*. And *Napoleon Dynamite* I thought was terrific.

You grew up in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. I'm curious if comedy played an important role in your life during what was otherwise a very violent time?
Certainly cinema was a big release, comedy or not. It was a turbulent time. And escape was very, very important. School sports — I was an amateur boxer as a kid.

I read that you had a try out for the Irish soccer team Bohemian F.C.
I don't know where that story came from — it's totally not true! I have two left feet when it comes to soccer.

Is there anything from your experiences as a boxer that you've carried with you?
Preparation, and keeping fairly physically fit for life, and certainly for playing leads in movies. Because the work's exacting, there are long days. It behooves you to be reasonably fit.

Like yourself, original *Naked Gun* star Leslie Nielsen came from a more dramatic background. How did your dramatic sensibilities inform your comedic ones?
In the movie, I try and play every scene as serious as I can. Maybe a little heightened for certain things. I don't play for comedy — that's one rule I set for myself. Don't play the comedy. That hopefully will come across with your fellow actors.

Have you seen the videos of him doing interviews with the fart machine?
I did. I saw a couple.

Even those he manages to play pretty straight.
Yeah, he keeps it straight, but it's sweet, innocent schoolboy humor.

Comedy is all about timing, but so is action and fight choreography. Do you see any kind of connections between the two?
I suppose there is. That's an interesting question. You rely on your director and your editor, of course, certainly with fight sequences. In *The Naked Gun,* I was surrounded by terrific actors and actresses, especially Pamela Anderson. She's outstanding in the film — she's sexy, funny, and just great to work with.

In *Taken*, you famously say, "What I do have are a very particular set of skills." What particular skills have you acquired over your career?
Certainly with acting, you're always questing. You know what I mean? I never feel I've done it. There's always stuff to learn, with different actors and actresses you're working with, as well as different directors. As I said earlier, I just try to be real. And show up on time. That's very important. I hear disturbing stories about actors and actresses who are very gifted, but show up on the set two, three, four hours late. I would never work with those people. I think it's so insulting.

Punctuality is key.
Yes, very, very important, I think. Because you have a crew of like 60, 70, 80 people waiting for you. The very least you can do is give them the respect by turning up on time. ®

Interview by JON BLISTEIN

PHOTOGRAPHS WITHIN ILLUSTRATION BY DIMITRIOS KAMBOURIS/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL LOCCISANO/GETTY IMAGES; MIKE COPPOLA/GETTY IMAGES

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